BOOK GIRL

and the Scribe Who Faced God
Part 1

MIZUKI NOMURA

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Part 1

Mizuki Nomura

Illustrations by Miho Takeoka

Yen Press

New York

Begin Reading

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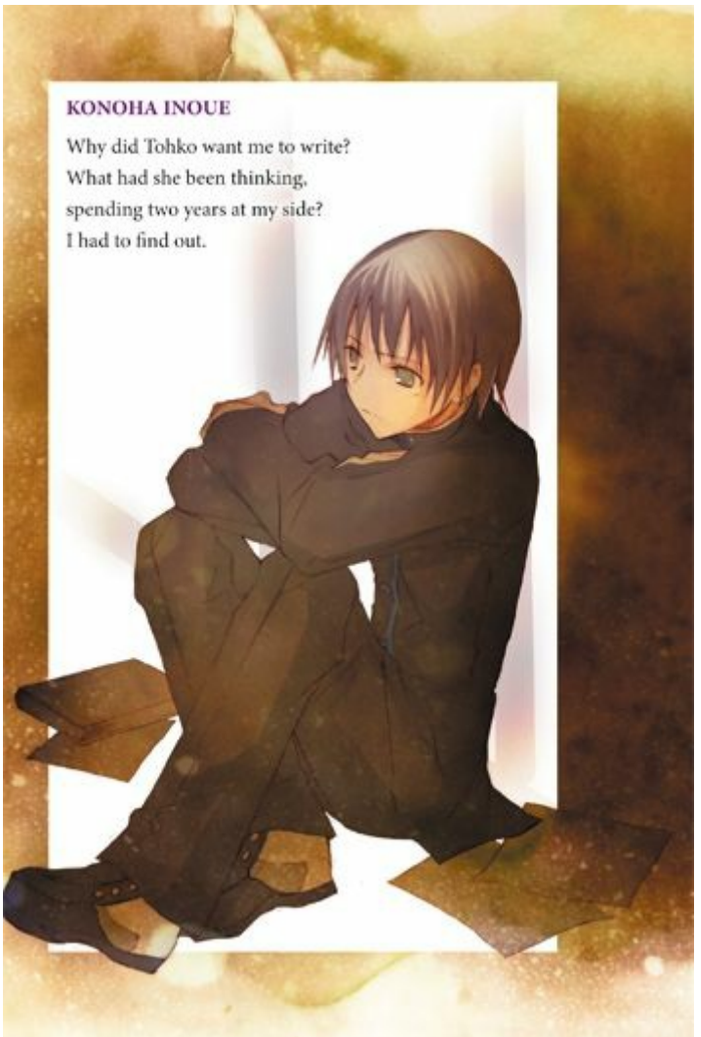
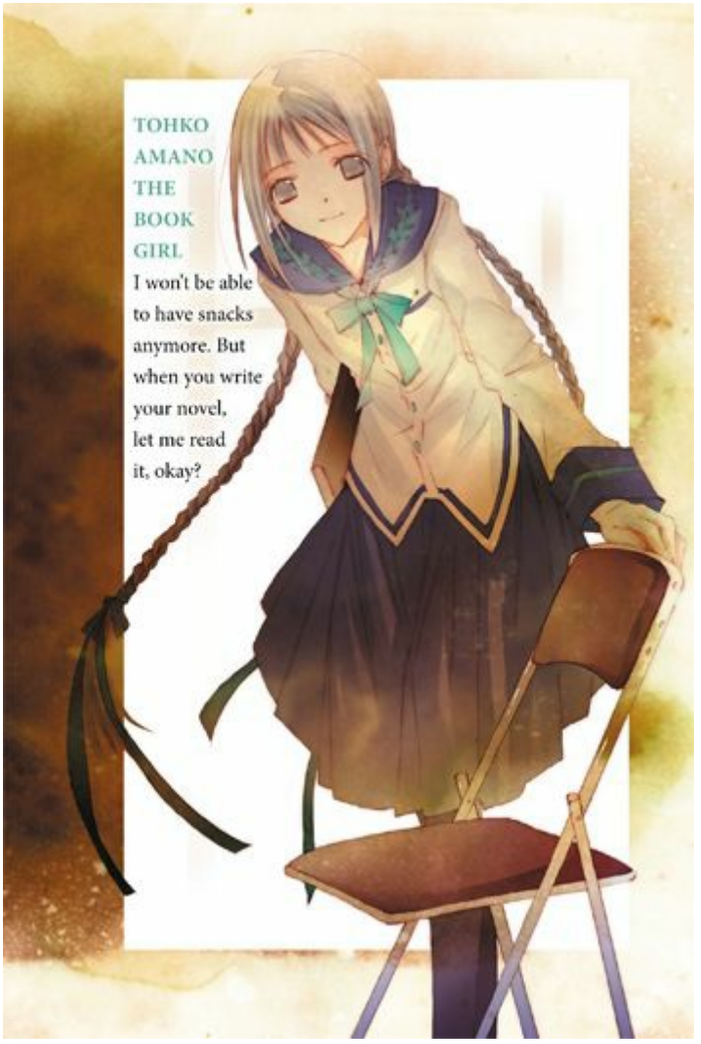
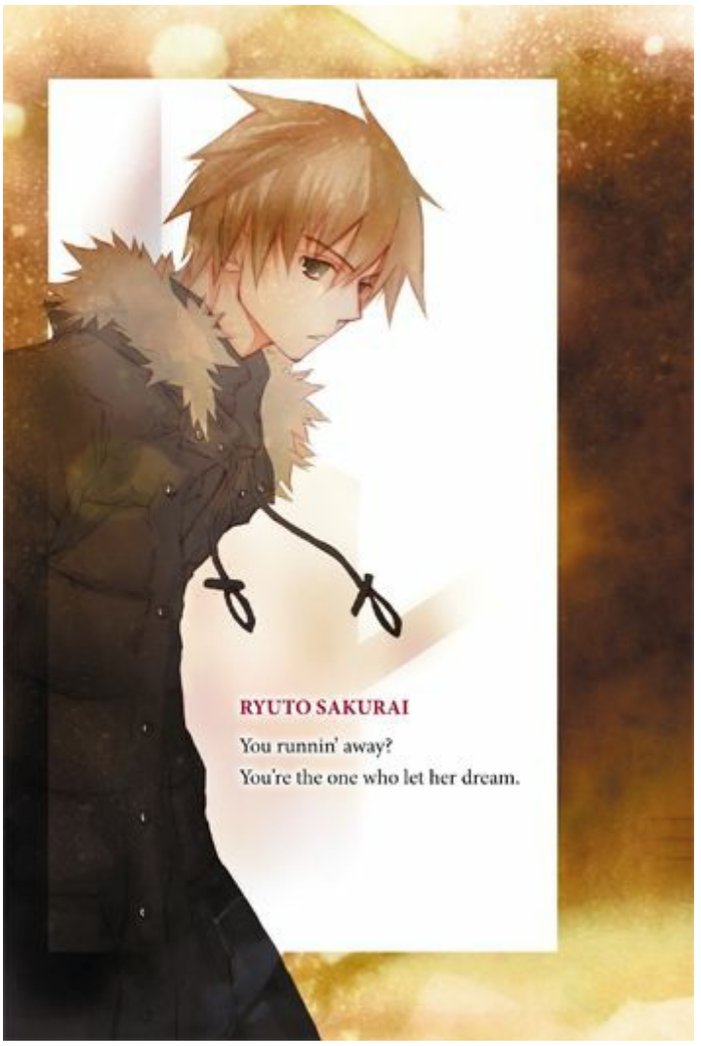
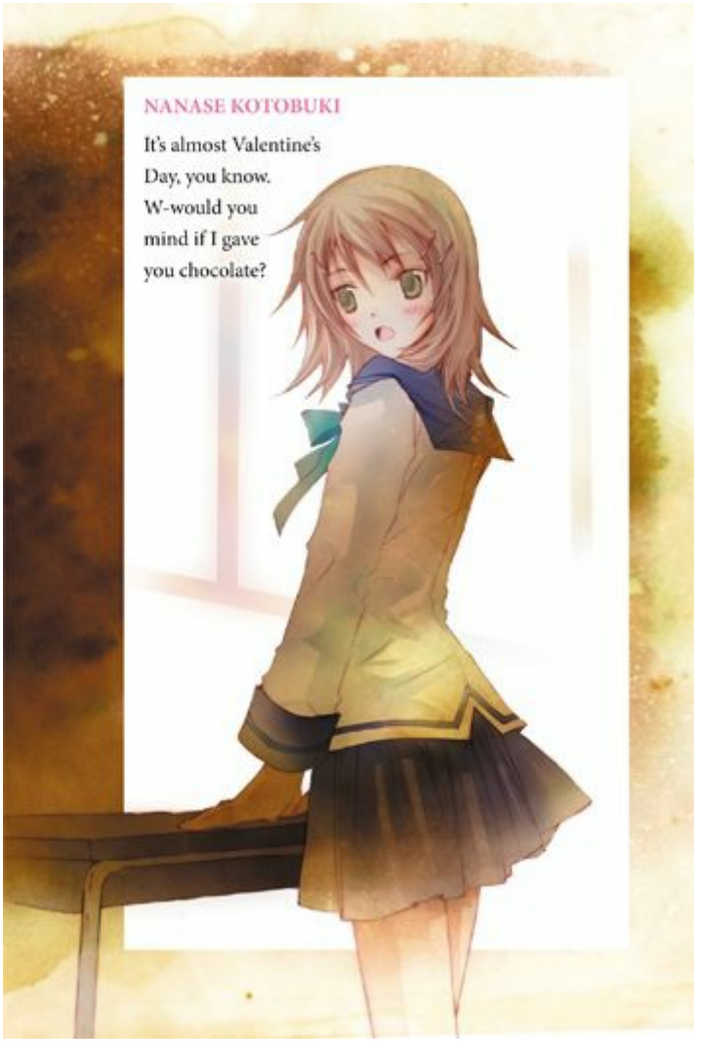
Mizuki Nomura


KONOHA INOUE
Why did Tohko want me to write?
What had she been thinking,
spending two years at my side?
I had to find out.


TOHKO
AMANO
THE
BOOK
GIRL
I won't be able
to have snacks
anymore. But
when you write
your novel,
let me read
it, okay?


RYUTO SAKURAI
You runnin' away?
You're the one who let her dream.


NANASE KOTOBUKI
It's almost Valentine's Day, you know. W-would you mind if I gave you chocolate?

"I'LL HEAD OFF NOW. THANK YOU
FOR LETTING ME USE YOUR SCARF."
"GOOD-BYE."

THMP!
THMP!
THMP!
THMP!
THMP!

The day before he died, Takumi gave me a little violet-colored bottle.

It was cute, shaped like a heart, with fine silver dust in it.

“It’s the sleeping powder of Ole Lukøje,” Takumi whispered, gazing into my eyes.

He said that if I took this, all of my pain and sadness would melt away like snow. I wouldn’t feel hatred, doubt, or jealousy. I’d be able to sleep untainted, as if cradled in the arms of God.

He said that I could take some, and I could let other people have some, too.

I put the sleeping powder of Ole Lukøje that the little violet bottle held within it into a locked jewelry box. Sometimes I take it out and hold it in the light and gaze at it.

I stare through the translucent violet glass, entranced by the tenderly rolling silver dust. I press it to my flushed cheek, and the cool sensation heals me.

As long as I have this vial, I can change my destiny.

Surely I could even pass through the gates of heaven that tower so high and far away.

To whom does this heart in my hand now belong?

To me? To him? To you, Kana?

Prologue—Memories for an Introduction: What She Wished for That Day

It doesn’t matter who you are. If you want to find God, you have to be alone.

There was a person who told me that in a sisterly tone.

When I started high school, I had at my side a president who looked after me like an older sister.

A book girl with long black braids that reached her waist, who at first glance looked old-fashioned and genteel. And yet she had a pushy way of talking and caused trouble for everyone around her, and when classes had ended for the day, she would come all the way to my first-year classroom to fetch me.

At first I couldn’t stand her.

But no matter how much I ignored her, no matter how much I scrunched my face up in annoyance and turned away from her, no matter how bitingly sarcastic I was, she would blubber and sulk, but the next day she would be beaming like a flower and appear in my classroom with a *“Club time, Konoha!”*

One summer morning I caught her climbing a tree at school.

Apparently she believed that if you tied a ribbon around a tree branch without anyone seeing you, your wish would come true. It was a girly and totally baseless legend that had been passed down through the generations of our school. Her eyes were focused straight ahead and there was a look of intense concentration on her face as she untied the turquoise ribbon at the front of her uniform. She was just starting to tie it on the end of a branch when she lost her balance and almost fell. That was when she noticed me watching. She turned bright red and

got flustered.

“A baby bird fell out of its nest, so I was putting it back.”

That was the kind of childish excuse she made up.

But I wonder what she was trying to wish for with her turquoise ribbon that day.

She lingers in my memory, joyously flipping through the pages of a book in the cramped clubroom filled with the gentle golden light of sunset.

I wonder who she was.

I wonder what was going through her mind as she sat beside me, constantly wearing her kind smile, while I faced my lined paper.

What had the book girl wished for that day?

Chapter 1—My President and My Girlfriend

“This poetry collection by Misuzu Kaneko is like cherry-leaf rice cakes. The coarse, gummy pink cake gently enfolds the sweet bean paste inside.”

Tohko whispered with an ecstatic look on her face, gulping down the fragment of the page she’d ripped off.

She didn’t even have to come to school right now because she was studying for her college exams, and yet she was casually *eating books* in the clubroom in February. I thought she was crazy, but Tohko had declared, “I passed my National Center Test, so I’ll be fine! I have to take a little break anyway.”

I don’t know whether it was out of confidence or carelessness, but she started showing up at the clubroom.

And so, while she was waiting for the improv stories she snacked on to be done, she sat with her feet perched on a fold-up chair next to the window where she expounded on a book enthusiastically while flipping and munching and crunching through the pages of it.

“Misuzu Kaneko was a children’s poet from Yamaguchi Prefecture, born on April 11, 1903—the thirty-sixth year of the Meiji emperor’s reign. Her hometown was a port city with plentiful whaling where her family ran a bookstore. She got married and had kids, and she wrote poetry the whole time.

“Every one of her poems tastes free and relaxed and cute and gentle.

“When it comes to cherry-leaf rice cakes, you have the eastern style from Chomeiji Temple, where the bean paste is sandwiched inside a smooth cake, and the western style of Domyoji Temple, where a mealy cake is wrapped around the bean paste. I think Kaneko’s poems are definitely mealy. When you bite through

a salt-pickled cherry leaf and into the soft cake with cute little bumps in it, the leaf shatters, scattering the fragrance of cherry blossoms everywhere while your white teeth sink slowly into the cake to reach the faint sweetness of the beans! C'mon, you've heard this poem before, haven't you, Konoha?"

Tohko closed her eyes and recited the poem in a clear voice.

"Even when I spread my arms wide,

I cannot soar into the sky, not even for a second,

But the birds who can

Cannot run swiftly over the earth like I do.

"Even when I sway my body,

I cannot make a beautiful sound come out,

But the chirping sparrow

Does not know as many songs as I do.

"The sparrow, the birds, and me:

We are all different, and we are all special."

She opened her eyes, turned to me, and beamed rapturously.

"Isn't that great? 'We are all different, and we are all special.' This part is really, *especially* sweet and delicious!"

And so she crinkled through her meal, her eyes closed happily while she went on about "the beans cling to your tongue" or "it's sweet, but not too wordy; I could keep eating forever."

"Kaneko died at the age of twenty-six, but they say she was an incredibly serious person, very warm and kind. She suffered a lot of hardships. But her younger brother, the person who was closest to her, protected the notebooks in which she'd written her poems."

She hugged the book that had half its pages torn out of it. Just when I thought she was going to murmur how deeply moved she was, she looked back at me and hurried me on with a bubbly expression.

“Time’s almost up, Konoha. Is my snack ready?”

“Here you go. You had the ‘owl,’ ‘hot spring,’ and ‘accordion curtains,’ right?”

I tore out the three lined pages of the improv story I’d just written and handed them over. Tohko reached out her alabaster hands and beamed even more.

“Thanks. Here goes!”

As her eyes fell exuberantly on the words, her delicate fingers carefully tore in from the edge of the paper. She brought the piece of paper to her lips and crunched her teeth into it.

“Once you finish that, you should go straight home and study.”

“Geez. You shouldn’t say things like that when your president was worried about her underclassman and came to see how he was doing. Ooh, this part’s great!”

She had pouted her cheeks out to complain, but they stretched into a smile so easily.

“The owl’s got stiff shoulders, so he’s going to a hot spring to recuperate. And there are accordion curtains going all the way around the spring! It’s so cute and fairy tale-ish. Like eating steamed buns that are still billowing with sweet steam. There’s potatoes inside, all fluffy. Ahhh, and with a rustle of the accordion curtains, music begins to play.”

With a chorus of sighs at how delicious everything was, her fingers tore into the page.

“Konoha, at first you’d write only weird stuff that didn’t have any punctuation marks or that ended with someone suddenly falling down a manhole or getting a leg massage from a ghost, but you’ve really gotten good.”

“That so?”

The earlier work had been purely to torment her, though. Tohko looked incredibly happy and grinned, taking one bite and then another.

“When are your exams again?”

“The middle of March. My last day of exams is still a long way off.”

“That’s not far away at all! That’ll be over before you know it.”

Had she forgotten how she’d washed out of the qualifying exam when she tried to take the test for Tokyo University during the first round of exams? She claimed she’d done that one for the memories, but she was being *so* reckless. How had her teachers not quit? No matter how I looked at it, it seemed likely she was going to fail. Was she so confident she’d pass for her top pick? No, she’s just freewheeling and thoughtless.

“What schools are you planning to take exams for exactly?”

“That’s a secret,” Tohko answered blithely as she ate my story. “If I pass, then I’ll tell you. You have to celebrate with me.”

“How many years from now will that be?”

“You’re so meeean. You think I’m going to fail! You don’t have any faith in your president, do you?”

“How could anyone have faith in a president who makes her underclassman help her with summer homework?”

“That was just because I happened to run out of time! Fine. In that case I’m definitely going to pass and show you what I’m capable of.”

She declared stalwartly. Then she popped a fragment of paper in her mouth, and her eyes instantly rolled back.

“Urk—s… so spicy!!”

She flinched and covered her mouth with her hands as her eyes grew bleary.

“Wh-what *is* this? I was listening to elegant music at a hot spring, but now the accordion curtain opened and out came an owl spattered with blood. Whaaa—? Revenge? Wait—oh no! There’re globs of lumpy mustard right in the middle of my steamed bunnnns! Ack, you’re so mean! Evil! It’s all lumpy and spicyyyy.”

Fat tears spilled from her dark black eyes as she glared spitefully at me.

“Urrrgh… it was a feint.”

“But the shock went through your brain and you’re all refreshed now, right?”

I said it with a smile, and Tohko whispered, “… I don’t want a shock like that…”

All of a sudden, our routine conversation made my heart twist.

As if I wanted to continue these meaningless talks in this tiny room filled by the gentle golden light before the sun set. It was an eerie feeling.

But…

I looked at the clock on the wall and gasped.

“Sorry, I have to get going.”

Tohko had thrown herself against the chair and shrunk into a blubbering ball, but when I started hurriedly packing up my mechanical pencil and notebook, she looked up.

“Are you meeting up with Nanase?”

“Wh—?… Uh, I’m…”

How come her intuition worked only for things like this?!

Although it was perfectly natural that Kotobuki and I would walk home together since we had started going out, having my president draw attention to it was no reason to stutter. Couldn't I just answer "yup" like a normal person?

And yet for some reason my voice squeaked. My heart was racing, my cheeks grew hot, and I was flustered, which made Tohko smile at me with kind, motherly eyes.

"Hurry up and go meet her. You shouldn't keep a girl waiting."

"R-right."

I picked up my bag and awkwardly slipped my arms into the sleeves of my jacket. It didn't go well since my fingers caught on the cuffs. Tohko watched my performance with a warm gaze. That made me even more self-conscious, and sweat beaded on my forehead.

"You should go home soon, too, Tohko."

"I-I-I wiiiill."

She waved to me offhandedly, sitting with her knees drawn up on the fold-up chair, shrouded in the transparent gold of the western sun.

And her expression was bright, without the shadow of a cloud hanging over it… but for some reason my heart ached.

There was a lingering haze over my mind, like a fog that refused to clear. I was convinced it was because Tohko wouldn't tell me anything important.

How had Tohko known the words that were written in Miu Inoue's first draft?

After the planetarium, I'd tried again and again to get it out of her. I'd tried catching her off guard or asking her flat out, but Tohko had only smiled softly at me and managed to change the subject somehow.

How had Tohko read the handwritten submission that I wasn't sure was even still at the publisher's office? And when?

Did it have anything to do with the fact that she wouldn't tell me what schools she wanted to get into, either?

Gah. I was just going in circles.

I furrowed my brow, then quickly smoothed it back out. I couldn't let Kotobuki see me looking like this.

She waited for me at the checkout desk in the library, which was dyed red by the setting sun. She had on a navy-blue peacoat, and a pink scarf was wound around her neck.

She was hugging her bag in her arms, her head bowed and a brooding look on her face. Then she looked up at me and an embarrassed smile broke over her face. Her pure, sparkling smile brightened my spirit, and a smile came naturally over my face.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Let's go."

"Okay."

She gave a slight nod and stood up happily.

"It's almost Valentine's Day, you know. W-would you mind if I gave you chocolate?"

Kotobuki asked me this the next morning, staring at me, her face red.

It was still early, so there weren't that many people around. She lowered her voice to a whisper.

"And, uh… would you hate it if it was homemade?"

"No way. That's fantastic."

When I answered, she grew slightly sheepish, then abruptly turned her face away and said, all in a panicked rush, "I-I make it every year for my dad, so I'd just throw yours in, too. Oh, but I'll use better ingredients and stuff than his, and I'll do a different design and everything. So I'm just gonna do it as part of his, but it's not totally the same. So, um—"

She really is such a girl. Once I got used to the blunt way she had of talking and her abrupt manner, her flustered reactions could be cuter than anything.

"I can't wait. Those cookies you baked me before were really good, too."

"I made those for everyone! You just happened to be there."

It really was sweet the way she was arguing it so heatedly, and I couldn't help but let a smile turn the corners of my mouth.

"D-did I say something funny?"

"No, no."

"But you're smiling at something."

"Am I?"

Kotobuki pursed her lips and glowered at me. I was struck by an urge to see what would happen if I told her it had just occurred to me how cute she was. But just then there was a bright voice behind me.

"Morning, Nanase! Inoue!"

Nanase's friend Mori came up to us, beaming brilliantly.

"I heard you guys are going out. I-I-I saw you two walking home together yesterday, and things were looking *good*. I called Nanase afterward and forced her to come clean."

"What?"

"M-Mori!"

Kotobuki choked and grabbed Mori's hand.

Oblivious, Mori addressed me in a cheerful voice.

"Don't worry. I'll keep it quiet for a little while. Nanase's so gorgeous and popular, if the boys found out, you'd be in *trouble*."

I was definitely wondering just how long "a little while" was going to be. I didn't mean to hide that I'd started going out with Kotobuki, but I didn't want to purposefully spread the news around, either.

Mori bobbed her head reassuringly.

"Oh, I get it. When you keep a relationship hidden from everyone, it charges it up. So I won't tell anyone for now."

And how long was *that* going to be?

"Nanase's only so curt because she's shy. She's a really nice girl, so you take

care of her. You can ask me anything, like her favorite color or her favorite food, or where she likes to go on a date, or what kind of situations drive her wild, or whatever."

I was sure Mori had good intentions. But hearing her say all this stuff to my face was pretty embarrassing.

"M-Mori! Get over here."

Kotobuki wrapped both her hands around Mori's arm and dragged her to a corner of the classroom.

"Whoa, whoa, what's wrong, Nanase?"

"Just come with me."

And so she dragged her off. I watched them and saw Kotobuki's eyebrows hike way up, yelling at Mori energetically. Mori was smiling and reassuring her. It looked like girls had it tough with their relationships, too.

"Morning, Inoue. Why are you frowning?"

I turned around and found Akutagawa standing there.

"Morning. It's nothing major. Just thinking how much girls seem to love secrets."

He looked in the direction I'd been facing and saw Kotobuki and Mori discussing (?) something at length. He nodded in sympathy.

"Well, if that's all it is."

Then his eyes softened teasingly.

"Things are going well with Kotobuki, huh?"

"Yeah, thanks."

"Well, then. The guys are crazy about her, though, so you better prepare yourself for when the news gets out. They're going to hate you."

"Urk. You're probably right."

"Well, that's the problem with having something nice."

Then Akutagawa told me about how he had gone to the hospital to visit Miu

yesterday. Apparently she was working hard and getting progressively better. She might be able to leave the hospital sometime in the spring. Of course, she'd have to go back to the hospital for physical therapy, and there was still the issue of which of her parents she was going to live with.

"I think she wants to rent a place and live on her own. She was telling me she wanted to start studying again, even if she had to go to night school or online classes. She's in negotiations with her folks right now. I'm sure it's difficult for her, but I hope I can be of some help to her."

"Wow… Miu's really doing a lot, huh?"

When I listened to him talk about Miu, I felt a faint pain. An ache as if the scars that lingered on my heart were being pressed by a finger. But stronger than that was my joy because Miu was facing the future and moving toward it. Warm feelings welled up in me.

"Tell her if there's anything I can do, just ask."

With a placid smile, Akutagawa nodded and said, "Will do."

Then he drew his eyebrows together and his face turned suddenly sour.

"Actually, I'm against her getting a place. A young girl living on her own has a lot of issues to deal with. And there are a lot of good-for-nothing guys like Sakurai out there."

His voice was prickly. It was strange to see Akutagawa expressing so much displeasure for another person.

"Ryuto didn't come to see her again, did he?"

My question made Akutagawa's face twist even more with jealousy.

"Yeah, he did. This weekend he came with some outrageous bouquet he said a girl at a florist's just gave to him. Asakura looked irritated, but he kept chattering at her, totally oblivious. Finally he told her that she fits his style and tried to convince her to go out with him."

"What?! Ryuto's going out with Takeda!"

Just the other day, I'd seen him with his elbows on the checkout desk in the library, talking to Takeda. I'd been flabbergasted by that.

Ryuto must have worked the head librarian over somehow because he'd started brazenly visiting the library. He wore a jacket over his uniform, so I guess he hadn't been exposed as belonging to another school yet, but he stood out anyway because he was tall and his features and the aura he gave off were both so dazzling.

The girls would whisper: "Y'know, I've been seeing that guy a lot lately. I wonder what year he's in. He's sooo hot." "Maybe we should say something to him." "But that girl at the desk looks like she's his girlfriend." That just made me even more nervous.

With an incorrigible smile, Ryuto had said, "Well, I'm goin' out with Chee an' all. If you like a girl, you wanna see her every day."

And then to ask Miu if she wanted to go out—he hadn't changed at all! What about Takeda?

"I pointed that out, too. And he said he'd be going out with Takeda, *too.* Without even blinking. And there's more. I heard a girl from another school came to the library the other day and slapped Sakurai."

"Whoa…"

I'd actually witnessed a girl hitting Ryuto before. Although he'd brushed it off, like he was used to it. Was he doing the same thing at our school now? And in the library of all places! But Kotobuki hadn't said a word about it.

"I heard he got into it with that third-year Himekura, too."

"Maki?!"

I was even more blown away by that and had to clarify.

"At the library? Maki went to the library?"

Akutagawa nodded, his brow furrowed.

"I heard she decked him right in the face."

"Are you serious?!"

My eyes bugged out. Kotobuki hadn't mentioned that, either!

According to Akutagawa, Maki had smiled brightly and then immediately left

the library. He said Ryuto had been knocked back and fallen to the ground and that he'd looked upset.

Upset—that part tugged at me. Ryuto, the one who reveled in the battles, who grinned and said, "I'm a masochist," even when girls hit him or told him off.

Ah, but Ryuto and Maki didn't get along.

Maybe because they were so similar, both in appearance and in personality, they seemed to consider each other natural enemies. Even at Maki's villa over the summer, there had been an altercation. Maki had dealt Ryuto a kick and knocked him to the floor then, too. And I was pretty sure he'd shouted, "Bully!" at her.

"I'm sure Ryuto said something that made Maki mad. It's his own fault."

"Absolutely. By the end of things yesterday, I wanted to hit him, too. Not that that's a surprise. But of course, no matter what Sakurai said, Asakura wouldn't engage him."

Akutagawa really was annoyed.

What are you doing, Ryuto? Actually, what does Takeda think about how you're acting? Thinking about it made my brain feel muddled.

When I asked Kotobuki about it during a break between classes, her face stiffened and her eyes darted around in distress before she dropped her head.

"It's true. All that stuff did happen, but… it… it looks like it doesn't bother Takeda."

"Oh."

"She was talking about it and laughing. She said, 'It's 'cos Ryu has lots of girlfriends.' "

"Hmmm…"

Kotobuki stole a worried glance at me as I murmured, my face grim.

"Did you hear about it from Sakurai? Have you seen him?"

"Huh? No, Akutagawa told me."

"Oh…"

Kotobuki's face was still somber. It got to me, so—

"Uh, I'm not like Ryuto. You know that, right? I only have one girlfriend," I rambled inadvertently.

Instantly, she turned bright red.

"Ack! What're you talking about?! I wasn't asking that, obviously! You moron."

She pursed her lips and turned her face away.

"A-anyway, I promised Mori and the others that I would go eat grilled pancakes with them, so I can't go home with you…"

I nodded with a smile.

"That's fine. You have to make time for your friends, too."

"Urk…" Kotobuki choked and she looked up at me. "Hey, are you mad that I told Mori?"

"Why would I be mad?"

"Well, I mean… I just thought you might not like it."

"No way. After all, I told Akutagawa that we're going out."

When I said that, Kotobuki's face shone.

"Really! So you told him about us?"

"Do you want to go somewhere on Sunday? Are you free?"

"Yup, I'm free."

"Where should we go, then? Is there somewhere you've been wanting to go?"

"I…"

Kotobuki's eyes glistened again.

"I want to see your house."

"My house?"

"I-i-i-i-if you don't want me to, that's okay. It's not like I *have* to see it. We could go to the movies or the aquarium or whatever. I totally don't—"

A chuckle slipped out of me.

“It’s fine. There’s pretty much nothing in my room, but if you don’t mind that, you can come over on Sunday.”

She looked up at me, and her face was bursting with sunshine. A candid, girlish smile spread to fill it.

“Okay! Thanks. I definitely will.”

After school, I watched Kotobuki leave the classroom with Mori and her friends, looking happy, then went to the book club room.

When I opened the door, to my utter exasperation, yet again today the book girl, with her long braids, dressed in her school uniform, sat with her feet drawn up on a fold-up chair, reading a book she had spread open on her lap. When Tohko saw me, she beamed.

“You’re here again?”

“Why would you say that to me? After I stole a few precious minutes between studying for exams to come see you.”

“You came yesterday, and the day before that, and the day before that, too. I’m running low on gratitude.”

“Grrr, you’re no fun at all.”

Tohko pouted.

“But it’s perfect timing. There’s something I wanted to ask about Ryuto—”

“Konoha? Could I come over to your house this weekend?”

“Wha—?” I said stupidly. I’m sure my face was equally blank.

Why did she want to come over all of a sudden? And on the weekend to boot?

“I was thinking I ought to visit your house at least once. What do you think?”

“What do you mean what do I think? I mean…”

Tohko looked at me pleasantly.

“Do you have plans?”

“No.”

“Then it’s settled. I’ll come by your house at two o’clock on Saturday.”

While I struggled through my daze, Tohko's visit was swiftly decided.

I wasn't able to ask about Ryuto. Or rather, I completely forgot to continue with my question.

And so it was that Tohko was to come to my house on Saturday and Kotobuki on Sunday.

Ack… what was I going to I tell my mother?

"Oh, that Amano girl?"

On Friday night when I told my mother that Tohko was coming over, she responded with an embarrassingly overblown reaction.

"My, my, my, I can't believe the girl who's done so much for you is coming over!"

She was so excited, her eyes sparkling in a shockingly girlish way.

"It's thanks to her that you've cheered up. I've never done more than answer the phone when she calls, but I've been impressed at how polite and upstanding a young lady she is. I've wanted to meet her for the longest time. We owe her so much."

"It's not that big of a deal."

Since my mother was in such a stir, even my father, who often went out for business on Saturdays, was seized with curiosity and wound up declaring, "What's this? The girl who helped Konoha is coming over? Well, then, maybe I should be here tomorrow, too."

"Mommy, who's coming over?"

"Ho-ho. Someone very important to your big brother," I heard her tell my elementary school–aged sister, Maika, her voice spilling over with joy. I thought my face might burst into flames.

"Mom! It's *not* like that!"

"Look at how embarrassed you are, Konoha. Oh, I can't wait for tomorrow. Her voice is so pretty. She's a very slender and lovely young lady, isn't she?"

"How do you know what Tohko looks like?"

“Of course I would. When I was cleaning your room, I saw a photo of her. She has long braids and she was wearing a swimsuit—isn’t that her?”

She said it offhandedly, but I was horrified.

Was that one of the ones Itagaki from the photography club had forced me to buy, with Tohko in a swimsuit or gym clothes or whatever? The ones I had bought an entire set of because her chest was so absolutely flat that I couldn’t bear to let her be exposed?

“I don’t have that for any perverted reasons! It was purely out of obligation! Besides, now he can’t give them to people!! I had to take them.”

Even my father was grinning at me trying so desperately to defend myself. Then Maika asked me, “What does perverted mean?” in her innocent voice, and I choked.

My mother was full of enthusiasm, saying, “What should I make for snacks? I’ll have to go get ingredients in the morning. Oh, do you think she’ll stay for dinner? You do your mother a favor and invite Amano to dinner, Konoha.”

“I… don’t think she can do dinner. And really, you don’t need to bother with snacks, either.”

“What? But why?”

“She… she doesn’t eat much. She only eats about a sheet of paper for lunch. I think her stomach is smaller than most people’s.”

It was true that she lived off paper, so it wasn’t like I was outright lying.

“Oh… I suppose that’s why she’s so thin,” my mother murmured disappointedly.

“Someone’s coming over on Sunday, too, so you can cook for them.”

“Oh? A friend?”

“Uh… someone from my class.”

It was so hard to tell her that it was the girl I was dating. Added to the fact that it was another girl coming over the very next day after Tohko was visiting.

“Who is it? Akutagawa?”

“No, not Akutagawa…”

“So you have more friends now! We really do have Amano to thank. Oh, but if it’s a boy, he’s going to eat a lot. I should make filling food.”

As my mother gleefully planned the menu, I found it impossible to tell her that it was a girl coming over.

The next day, Saturday, was a bright winter day with a clear sky.

“Hello. I’m Tohko Amano, president of the book club. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Tohko came over dressed in a navy duffle coat over her school uniform—not a detail different from usual—and greeted us formally at the front door.

Her voice was soft and restrained, too. Her gaze was open and unaffected, and there was not a hair out of place in her long, tightly woven braids or a pleat amiss on the hem of her skirt. At the sight of the sage, old-fashioned beauty that was Tohko, my father and mother both gasped in deep admiration.

“Come in, come in. I’m Konoha’s mother. Thank you for all you’ve done for him.”

“I’m Konoha’s father. I hope you’ll continue keeping an eye on our son.”

I watched as both of my parents bowed deeply to Tohko, and then all I wanted was to get out of there.

“Hello, my name is Maika.”

Maika gave a neat bow, too.

“Hello there, Maika.”

Tohko knelt down to bring her eyes to Maika’s level to greet her, and my parents looked on with even greater approval.

Tohko had brought a paper bag that she now held out to my mother.

“I made some cream puffs, and I’d like for all of you to have them. I’ve heard that you’re very good at cooking, ma’am, so I hope you don’t compare them to yours. But I enjoy making sweets, too,” she said, acting bashful.

I felt light-headed. She’d never made sweets in her life! How important *was* it

to her to show off?!

My mother was moved as she accepted the cream puffs.

“Well! What a very polite and elegant young woman you are. And you’re even prettier than in your picture.”

“My picture?”

Tohko quirked her head to one side mildly.

I grabbed her arm before the fact that I had photos of her in a swimsuit could be revealed.

“Okay, Mom, now you’ve met! Let’s go to my room, Tohko.”

I went upstairs, dragging along a very confused Tohko, and as soon as I closed my door, I broke out in a sweat.

“Konoha! That was so rude to your family.”

“Don’t you mean, that was such a performance? That was almost criminal fraud! Where did you buy those cream puffs?”

“How rude. I made them myself, out of a book.”

“Wha—? You mean you didn’t just buy some and put them in a new box?”

Tohko bonked me on the head.

“I would never do that.”

“You’re saying you know how to make sweets?”

“Heh-heh. Nothing is impossible for a book girl. I gave you those madeleines I made in home ec and that seasoned rice salad, remember?”

“We did that together. All you did was measure the butter and wash the carrots.”

“I also mixed in the butter and peeled the carrots! Y’know, if you eat my handmade cream puffs, they’ll be so good they’ll make you weep.”

As we engaged in our conversation, utterly unchanged from when we were in the clubroom, my door sloooowly opened.

Tohko quickly brought her performance back out with a giggle.

“That’s how it stands, Konoha.”

What was standing where now? Maika was watching us from behind the door, her eyes wide.

When Tohko realized that our visitor was a girl in elementary school, she dropped her shoulders back, pulled her face into a smile, and walked over to Maika.

Maika stared straight up at her. I guess it was weird for her to see a girl other than our mother in the house.

Tohko crouched down and smiled, just like she’d done before.

“What’s wrong, Maika?”

“… Are you… the preznent?”

“That’s right. I’m Konoha’s beautiful, reliable president who’s great at cooking and also a book girl.”

“That’s going a little far.”

“A book girl?”

“Yup. That means a girl who loves books so much she wants to eat them up.”

Maika tilted her head in confusion. Then she suddenly murmured “oh!” and turned around and pattered down the hall.

“Wouldn’t it make it easier for an elementary school kid to understand if you just told her you’re a goblin?”

“How mean! I am *not* a goblin.”

Just as Tohko had swung her arm over her head, Maika returned with flushed cheeks, cradling a picture book in her arms.

Tohko quickly hid her fist behind her back.

“Here.”

Maika held the book out.

“You’re like Anne, Miss Preznent.”

The book was an edition of *Anne of Green Gables* written for little kids. There

was a girl with braids wearing an old-fashioned dress and smiling on the cover.

Tohko smiled fondly at it. A pretty smile like a violet touched her lips.

“Oh, this book looks de*lic*ious,” she murmured in a gentle voice that suggested some memory she treasured was surfacing in her mind.

“This tastes good?”

“Oh yes, *Anne of Green Gables* is like an all-you-can-eat cake buffet, with the flavors of all kinds of desserts in it. There’s a tart piled high with freshly picked strawberries on top of custard. A charlotte with soft Bavarian cream surrounded on every side by slender, finger-shaped biscuits. A torte with layers of bittersweet caramel and sugary chocolate… The part where Anne refuses to be nice and can’t help snapping after she stops speaking to Gilbert is exactly like a sweetly sour lemon meringue pie.”

“Really? A lemon pie?”

Maika hugged the book tightly and her eyes grew wondrous.

“That’s right. Lemon is the flavor of youth… and the flavor of ‘first love.’ ”

Maika was looking up at Tohko’s smiling face, her eyes round and wholly absorbed.

Just then my mother appeared carrying a tray loaded with tea and sweets.

“Oh, Maika! You shouldn’t be bothering your brother! I’m so sorry, Amano.”

“Not at all. We should talk about books again sometime, Maika.”

“Okay! You have to tell me more about dessert!”

Maika pattered away again.

My mother had served the tea with bite-sized fruit pies and Tohko’s cream puffs.

“Your cream puffs are so lovely and light.”

“Making sweets is my hobby, after all.”

Tohko was going to ride this performance of hers to the end.

“Well, you two enjoy, then.”

“Thank you so much.”

The door shut quietly. Tohko gazed in the direction my mother and Maika had gone with an open, gentle look.

I found it a little odd and was just starting to wonder if anything was wrong when she murmured in a soft voice.

“What a lovely family.”

It caught me totally off guard to hear something like that out of nowhere. Then she murmured in an even gentler voice, sounding deeply emotional, “Your mother and your father are both so warm. And your little sister is such a cheerful little girl. Everyone seems to get along so well.”

Tohko slowly shifted her gaze around the room. She gazed slowly—affectionately—at the bright window with afternoon sunlight spilling through it, at the moss-green curtains my mother had made, at the bookshelves with comics and books mixed together indiscriminately, at the desk I’d used since elementary school, as if she wanted to burn each and every one of the images into her memory.

“You grew up in this house… surrounded by these kind people.”

My heart squeezed tight.

Why did she look like this?

Why was she saying something like that?

And why had she come to my house today?

“… What’s your family like, Tohko?”

I’d never asked her that before. Somehow I had the feeling that I shouldn’t ask why she was boarding at Ryuto’s house or where her parents were and what they were doing.

A sharp anxiety slowly bloomed inside me. My heart was thrumming the whole time.

Tohko looked at me and smiled gently.

“When I was little, I would taste test books with my dad a lot. I would sit on his

lap and together we would tear into a book—I went from the bottom and he went from the top—and we would talk about it… how it tasted like a fluffy rice omelet or a freshly baked doughnut or whatever. We would be eating the same book, but sometimes my dad and I would taste different things. When I was even smaller, my dad would feed me books and tell me, 'Hamburger tastes like this' or 'Stew tastes like this.' "

She looked and sounded happy. It showed how much Tohko loved her family.

"So your dad eats books, too?"

"Yeah. Although my mom could only eat regular food. She would always write my dad and me beautiful meals. My mom was a book girl like me, and when she was in school, she wanted to be an author."

Tohko gave a smile like a budding flower.

The steam from the tea rose gently from the white teacups.

"When my dad proposed to my mom, he said, 'I want you to be my author. Just mine.' "

A sweet yearning came into her clear, black eyes.

" 'Cos you're Tohko's author, Konoha."

The words Ryuto had said to me came suddenly back to mind, and my heart leaped so hard I thought for sure Tohko must be able to hear it beating.

Were those really the words Tohko's dad had used to propose?

This was bad. I couldn't get my heart to slow down!

The heat rose all the way to my face.

I hurriedly reached out for the cream puffs piled on top of a lace-patterned paper napkin.

My mother's praise hadn't been exaggerated. The surface of the cream puff was golden brown and beautifully puffy and it was heavy with cream.

"Considering you made these from scratch, they turned out great," I joked as I bit into the cream puff.

The supple custard from within the crispy shell spilled into my mouth. The next

instant, a shock like lightning shot through me from the tip of my tongue to the top of my skull.

“Urrrrrrgh!”

What *was* this?

It was so *salty*—no, there was a sharp sweetness, too! And it wasn’t the sweet bite of grilled, glazed rice dumplings; there was something more astringent or pungent, as if someone had dumped a ton of coarse salt on top of pudding. A trendy taste—wait, what was I saying? Nothing edible tastes like that!

“What’s wrong, Konoha?”

Tohko asked me uneasily since I was frozen, still holding the cream puff.

At long last I was able to swallow what I had in my mouth. I drank the burning hot tea, and then finally I was able to get my voice out.

“Tohko! You switched salt for the sugar in this custard!”

“What?!”

Tohko’s eyes popped.

“I couldn’t have—I paid close attention—are you sure you’re not tricking me, Konoha?”

“I’m definitely not. If you tasted it, you’d be able to tell in a heartbeat.”

I spoke without thinking and quickly shut my mouth. Tohko looked hurt.

“I’m sorry…”

“It’s fine.”

She shook her head awkwardly, then yelped, “Oh no!! I told your family to have some, too!”

We burst out of my room and ran downstairs.

When we opened the door to the living room, we saw my mother and father each holding the cream puffs they’d just bitten into and wearing conflicted looks on their faces, not saying anything. Maika was crying, “It’s too saaaaltyyyy.”

“Don’t get so down.”

“I’m sorry…”

When Tohko got back to my room, she hugged her knees and dropped her head on them. She was so glum, it was as if a shade had been pulled over the window behind her.

“My parents won’t care.”

They had both told her, “It’s fine” and “People mistake salt for sugar all the time,” and laughed it off. Maika had cried the entire time, though…

“Tohko?”

Even when I called her name, she kept her head down. She seemed pretty depressed. She probably thought her image as a wise and put-together president had been shattered.

Just then, she said in a cheerless voice, “I wanted you to have cream puffs that tasted good.”

A stab went through my chest.

Tohko didn’t know what the things we ate every day tasted like.

She probably didn’t usually have any reason to use sugar or salt. And yet she had made cream puffs from a recipe so that she could give them to us.

Even though she couldn’t taste them herself.

I picked up the half-eaten cream puff I’d tossed aside and bit into it.

“It’s pretty decent.”

“Konoha…!”

Tohko looked up and her eyes widened.

The grotesquely sweet but oh-so-salty taste spread thickly over my tongue.

I kept eating anyway, and when I’d swallowed the last bit of it, I reached for a second.

“Stop. You don’t have to force yourself to eat them.”

“… I’m not forcing myself.”

I bit into the second one.

“But—”

Tohko looked like she was about to cry.

“I’m just eating them because I want to.”

“You’re going to give yourself a stomachache.”

“My stomach’s not that delicate.”

Even though my mouth was coated in salt, the cream was also sweet and sharp and was turning into something amazing.

I reached for the third cream puff.

“That’s enough. You can stop.”

“… You’ve always finished everything.”

Tohko’s eyes widened.

“You’ve always finished everything I’ve written, without leaving a bite of it uneaten.”

Her face crumpled, her eyelashes fluttered, and her eyes filled with tears.

I swallowed the third cream puff, and calming my stomach, which felt like it was about to convulse, I slowly brought the fourth and last cream puff to my mouth.

If I didn’t do this fast, I was sure the contents of my stomach were going to come back up.

They say that when you keep eating spicy food, your tongue goes numb and you can’t feel anything anymore, but maybe because I tasted some sweetness in the cream, the stabbing sensation of the salt continued the same as ever. A cold sweat gathered at my temples.

I recalled Tohko weeping pathetically and eating the bizarre stories I wrote in the book club after school.

“Ugggh. This tastes weird! Instead of condensed milk on top of this strawberry shave ice, it’s topped with mayonnaise.”

At first I did it to be mean.

Then because I enjoyed her reactions.

Each and every day, I wrote a twisted story.

And yet no matter how Tohko wailed, no matter how many tears fell from her eyes, she would never leave something I wrote uneaten.

She would swallow the last bite and—"Thank you for making that. You're coming to the club tomorrow, right?"—she would smile cheerfully.

How had she been able to do that?

How had she kept on eating stuff that didn't even qualify as food every day?

When I thought about that, it wasn't just my stomach that grew full and hurt because of it; my heart did, too. Tohko watched me in silence as I fought to finish off the last cream puff.

When I finally forced everything down, my stomach felt like it was going to rupture, my heart felt queasy, and my throat was strangely prickly.

"Thank you for making these."

When I said that, Tohko gave a slight smile, her eyes still watery.

"… Thanks."

Tohko poured me a second cup of tea from the teapot.

I sipped timidly at the tea, which had cooled and felt nice on my tongue.

My stomach was convulsing again. I could never, *ever* repeat that performance.

Tohko picked up one of the bite-sized strawberry and orange tarts that my mother had made.

"These are so cute."

She smiled and popped it into her mouth.

A mysterious almost poignant, almost warm silence filled the room, and then Tohko murmured wistfully.

"Do you remember how you were so dark and rebellious and mean when you were a first-year?"

I almost spat my tea out.

“What are you saying?! Is that what you thought of me?”

Still smiling, Tohko said, “But you *were* mean. You would try to ditch club meetings, you acted cold when you talked to me, you would get sarcastic, you would write nothing but weird stories and mess with your president.”

“That’s because you dragged me into the book club against my will. I never wanted to get involved in clubs and I never wanted to write stories.”

At the end of a long, long winter. Spring had come very late that year.

After my life as a shut-in, I started high school still dragging behind me what had happened with Miu, and every day went by in gloom.

I didn’t want to interact with anyone. I didn’t want to get hurt again. I would be happy to have my days go by ordinary and peaceful. That had been my wish when Tohko appeared before me.

An old-fashioned girl from the next year above mine with long black braids, reading a book below a snow-white magnolia tree in the schoolyard.

When the apparently graceful young lady suddenly tore a page out of her book, I gawked at her.

“I’m going to keep you nearby so you don’t spill my secret.”

“I am Tohko Amano in class eight of the second-years. As you can see, I am a book girl.”

She gave her name, like a violet announcing the spring, sunnily and prettily, then took hold of my hand and led me to the cramped clubroom in the western corner of the school’s third floor. I was frantic.

Under those circumstances, there was no way I was going to open my heart to the older girl who defied all logic and ate paper. I’m sure the improv stories I jotted off, ignoring grammar and muddling the progression of the story, had a badly degraded flavor.

“Awww, so you really did do it on purpose.”

Tohko pouted and glared at me.

Then her expression softened again.

“But every once in a while you would write me delicious, heartwarming stories. Sourly sweet stories that made my heart clench tight and then stories that tasted just a little bitter… You’ve fed me a lot of stories, Konoha.”

The air grew poignant once again.

Tohko’s face—it struck me as somehow different from normal and that made me nervous.

“Where are you going to get your snacks when you go to college? You’re *not* going to tell me to send you letters every day. Right?”

Tohko smiled kindly.

“I won’t tell you to do that.”

My throat grew dry and my anxiety swelled even further.

The mood permeating the room was light and gentle. And yet something dark and heavy was gathering inside my chest.

As if Tohko would vanish any moment from right in front of me…

Tohko was staring straight at me, her eyes clear, as if she were watching something important.

I couldn’t look away, either.

“I won’t be able to have snacks anymore. But when you write your novel, let me read it, okay?”

A visceral pain shot through my heart, as if it had been grabbed all of a sudden by a clammy hand.

Tohko looked at me kindly.

She had said the same thing several times before.

How she wanted me to write a novel.

The pain continued to constrict my chest—enfolding it gently but firmly.

I was unable to answer, just as I had always been. My voice was lodged in my throat.

Tohko looked at me with a peaceful expression, like a much older person.

When the sun had set and it was starting to get dark, Tohko left my house.

“We’d love to have you again, Amano.”

“Thank you very much.”

She dipped her head politely to my family, and her cheeks flushing, she added in a murmur, “I’m sorry about the cream puffs.”

My parents both said jovially, “Oh, it’s fine.”

“Bye-bye, preznent.”

Maika waved energetically and Tohko gave a little wave back, said, “Bye-bye, Maika,” and left the house.

I went partway with her.

“Let’s stop here.”

Under the sickly glow of the streetlight, Tohko smiled, then held out the other paper bag she had brought to my house.

“It’s the scarf and gloves I borrowed from you. And the mechanical pencil, too. I’m sorry it took me so long to return them.”

I accepted the bag. Inside I could see a snowy-white scarf.

“You still have exams. Don’t you still need the pencil?”

It’s a charm to make miracles happen. I had offered it to Tohko, my cheeks burning, on a cold night when the north wind was blowing.

A grown-up smile came over Tohko’s face again.

“It was very helpful already. Thanks. I’ll work hard, so the rest is actual ability instead of a miracle.”

She was talking as if we were never going to see each other again—

As if she knew that and so was returning to me everything that she had borrowed.

It was the same sensation I’d had in my room that afternoon.

As if Tohko's figure would dim and then disappear at any moment.

It was like… this anxiety—as if my feet were slipping out from under me—crushed my chest. As Tohko started to leave, I grabbed her hand and pulled her back.

"Wait—it's still cold out!"

Why was I so panicked? A human being would never just disappear right in front of somebody one day!

When I pulled the scarf out of the bag, I smelled flowers, as if it had been freshly washed. Just as I'd done that night, I wrapped it around Tohko's neck.

"I'll let you borrow it again. Wear it home."

Tohko's eyes widened, then abruptly grew poignant. She seemed on the verge of crumbling. Then she smiled joyously.

"Thank you. A scarf really does keep you warmer."

"I'm not *giving* it to you, though! You have to bring it back to me!"

"Okaaay," she responded jokingly, then headed off into the darkness. I watched her go, the paper bag still in my hand, feeling like I was going to cry.

Tohko is Fumiharu's daughter after all, Kana.

On his days off, he sets her on his lap and they eat a book together. They look so happy.

Fumiharu's face is kind and enraptured as he tears the pages into little pieces and feeds them to her. She beams and stretches out her hands and turns her face up to his and pesters him mightily, "More, Daddy, more."

The sunbeam by the window in the living room is their favorite spot. They set a pillow down there, and as long as the golden light spills through the window in the evenings, they read a book, munch on the pages, and talk.

Things like "I got it, Daddy! *Mrs. Pepperpot* tastes like soup with lots of milk in it!" or even "*The Tales of Ise* is like sushi rice with mustard flowers draped on top of it."

She says the prickly interaction between Anne and Gilbert in *Anne of Green Gables* is like sour-sweet lemon meringue pie. That it tastes like "youth," like "first love." Tohko tells Fumiharu those things with a clear, beautiful gaze while he ruffles her bangs with his fingers.

I complained to Fumiharu that he should be more judicious with their snacks because if Tohko ate too much, she wouldn't have room for dinner.

He laughed and told me, "Nonsense. She'll never run out of room for dinner. Tohko and I love the food you write more than any book."

Fumiharu always knows exactly what to say and he always wins me over. But it's true that he and Tohko have polished off every meal I've ever written them.

The other day Tohko tried to eat a book in the children's corner of the library, and she got scolded by the librarian.

The young man was kind and wore glasses and Tohko liked him very much, so it was a blow for her. She was still crying when we got home.

"All I did was try to eat the book."

"The books at the library belong to everybody. You can't eat them. You can't eat the books they sell at bookstores, either. You can't eat a book unless you paid for it and it belongs to you."

Fumiharu took Tohko onto his lap and hugged her. As he gently instructed her, he stroked her bangs.

"And from now on, you can't eat books except with people you care about. What Daddy's telling you is very important, so you need to pay attention."

"People I care about?"

"Like Mommy or Daddy—one day someone you truly care about—you should only eat with your author."

"My author?"

And then Fumiharu told Tohko the story of how he proposed to me.

Tohko listened, enthralled, her cheeks flushing.

“Mommy is your author?”

“Yes. She’s my author and yours, too.”

When Fumiharu told her that, her face lit up with an excited smile.

“That’s great, Daddy. That’s really great.”

I wonder whether Tohko will ever meet someone who writes just for her.

I wonder what sort of person they’ll be.

Tohko’s hair has grown longer, so I braided it for her.

“I wore braids when I was in school, too. Braids are proof that you’re a book girl.”

When I told her that—“Just like you, Mommy”—she rejoiced.

I let her hair down and it billowed out—“Ex*act*ly like you”—and she danced around with even greater joy.

Sunday arrived, and I still hadn’t been able to tell my family about Kotobuki.

She came over before noon—at eleven o’clock.

“H-hello! I-I-I’m your son’s classmate. Nanase Kotobuki!”

My parents stared at her with ambiguous expressions, struggling for words, as she gave her stuttering, stiffly nervous introduction. Seeing those looks, I could tell exactly how confused they were, and I couldn’t help feeling uncomfortable.

“Um, h-here. I mean, I made this. I’d like all of you to have it.”

Just as Tohko had done the day before, Nanase held out a paper bag.

“Well… thank you for going to all that trouble.”

My mother rushed to take the bag from her. But her voice and expression were awkward and she was shooting glances at my father.

“I enjoy making sweets. I don’t know if it’s any good, though.”

At this statement that was again word for word what Tohko had said, my parents’ expressions became even more ambiguous.

“Kotobuki really does enjoy making sweets. And she’s good at it.”

I hurried to back her up and—“Oh, geez, I’m not *that* good,” she said, turning red. “Just don’t expect too much. I don’t know if it’s the kind of thing you like. Um, it’s a lemon meringue pie.”

“Wow! Lemon meringue pie!”

Maika, who was totally unable to pick up on the weird atmosphere, jumped up and down excitedly.

“Anne and Gilbert taste like lemon meringue pie! They taste sweet and sour! I want some lemon meringue pie. Thank you, Miss Nanase. Yaaaay, I got lemon meringue pie!”

Kotobuki’s eyes widened at Maika’s excited display, but still her expression brightened. I guess she was glad she’d made Maika that happy.

“Now, Maika, you need to behave in front of our guest,” my mother scolded.

But Maika was utterly consumed by the lemon meringue pie, and she peeked into the paper bag in my mother’s hand with glittering eyes.

“Come in, Kotobuki. Let’s go to my room.”

“O-okay.”

Kotobuki excused herself and took off her shoes. Maika sniffed deeply at the aroma from the paper bag and shouted.

“It smells goooood! The other girl’s cream puffs were so salty yesterday, but today’s girl brought lemon meringue pie! It looks sooo good.”

Kotobuki started.

“What… other girl?”

My mother, my father, and I all stiffened.

With an innocent, childlike grin, Maika unleashed the final blow.

“The preznent! She had braids and looks like Anne!”

A few minutes later, Kotobuki and I were alone in my room.

“Um…”

Kotobuki sat stiffly on the rug with her legs tucked under her. She had her

hands squeezed tightly together in her lap. The air was unbelievably loaded.

"Do you want to take off your coat?" I asked.

She stood up and took off her girlishly flouncy white coat, leaving her standing in a light pink sweater and black miniskirt.

I tried to offer her a hanger, but before I could, she'd bundled her jacket up and set it down beside her. Then she sat back down stiffly and gazed tensely at her knees.

Uh-oh. I needed to come up with something to talk about to cheer her up. I was racking my brains for something when she whispered, "… So Tohko was here."

Aaaaaack.

It felt like my heart was going to jump out of my mouth, and I broke out in a sweat. I explained it away quickly.

"I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to hide it from you. But it just so happened—I mean, yeah! It just so happened that she needed to talk to me about something for the club and she came over here for a little bit. It was purely a coincidence."

"… And she brought salted cream puffs?"

"Hold on, they weren't salted cream puffs—they were *over*-salted cream puffs. Nothing fancy. She mixed up the salt and sugar when she made them."

"… So Tohko happened to come over with cream puffs she'd made from scratch. Does she come over often?"

"Th-this was the first time! Yesterday was a first, and her making something from scratch was a first, and everything else was a first, and it was totally impossible to predict!"

Geez, what was I saying? Just as I'd worked myself into a corner, my mother came in. I was relieved.

Her tray held the tea set, slices of Kotobuki's lemon meringue pie, and also crispy sesame dumplings piled up on a plate. *Great, now we'll have some tea, eat some snacks, and it'll change up the mood a little—*

“I’m sorry. I wish I had prettier snacks for you. Konoha didn’t say that you were a girl, so I thought a boy was coming over.”

I saw Kotobuki’s shoulders twitch, and I felt as if a knife had been thrust into my neck. *Why would you blab about that, Mom?!*

“No, these are great. I love sesame dumplings, so this is perfect. Thank you.”

Though her words were polite, her voice was shaking. And her face was as hard as a rock.

As if sensing the turbulent mood, my mother practically fled the room.

“Um! Well! When he told me a classmate was coming over, I must have misunderstood and thought he meant a boy. And then he never denied it, and in any case, I wouldn’t know for sure until you actually came over, so I thought, *Why not?*”

Kotobuki was quiet.

“Your lemon meringue pie sure looks good, Kotobuki! I’m going to try it!”

I pulled a plate over, rattling it against everything, and plunged my fork into the pure white meringue.

The pie was extraordinarily soft, the crust crisp, and my fork cut through it effortlessly. When I brought it to my mouth, the fluffy meringue and, beneath that, the mixture of lemons and custard in the sour-sweet lemon cream combined with the crispness of the crust to spread across my tongue a delicious flavor that lived up to how good the pie looked.

“Wow! This tastes like a lemon meringue pie a pastry chef would make!”

My honest impression of it spilled out of me.

Kotobuki lifted her face and looked at me cautiously. Her lips were still pursed, but her cheeks were faintly flushed.

“It really is good. Mmm.”

She stared straight at me, her face turning redder and redder, as I cut out big pieces and took one bite after another.

When I started to laugh, she looked away, kind of flustered, and then suddenly

her face fell and she looked like she was about to start crying.

"… There's some cream on your face."

"Wh—"

I rubbed it away quickly with my hand.

Her head still bent, Kotobuki said brusquely, "I-I get jealous really easily. They said Tohko came over, and I've felt sick over it ever since. Smiling was just impossible. I-I'm sorry. I bet it's annoying. But you always act so natural when you're with Tohko, and I feel like she understands you way, way better than I do —"

"No way! Tohko's just my club president. It's not like that with us at all."

I leaned forward and put a hand on her thin shoulder.

Actually, I'd lied to Kotobuki about one thing, and it stabbed me through the heart.

Tohko wasn't *just* my club president.

She had been at my side for two years and become deeply linked to me. Not like family, not like a friend—she was special. But I wasn't in love with her.

Kotobuki was the one I was dating!

"Inoue…"

Kotobuki caught her breath.

Our eyes locked, and it was so hard to breathe it felt like something was lodged in my throat—the atmosphere made me think we were about to kiss when—
"Oh, I can find the way! Don't even worry about it."

I heard a familiar voice downstairs.

Then the sound of feet pounding up the stairs.

Suddenly the door opened without so much as a knock, and Ryuto came in with a cheery smile, wearing bleached jeans and a down jacket.

"Comin' in!"

"Ryuto!"

We stiffened, still close to each other. Kotobuki paled and my hand stayed where I'd left it, resting on her shoulder.

"Oops, am I interruptin' somethin'?"

He leered at us and we hastily moved apart.

"Wh-what are you doing here, Ryuto?"

"Oh, I was in the neighborhood, so I figured I'd swing by. You mind if I hang out with you guys?"

Without waiting for our answer, he pulled a pillow over and settled himself on it, then started grabbing my mother's sesame dumplings.

When Ryuto's butt hit the floor with a *thump*, Kotobuki jumped slightly.

"Whoa! These're great. Your mom made these? And I'm guessin' this pie is Kotobuki's."

"Um, Ryuto…"

Why? What was happening? Questions flooded my mind.

He'd never once come to my house before. And anyway, how could he be kicking back and this relaxed with Kotobuki clenching her jaw and glaring at him on her way to tears the way she was?

When my mother came into the room with tea and a piece of pie for Ryuto, he stuffed a third dumpling into his mouth.

"You're sure good at cookin', Mrs. Inoue."

"Why, thank you. There's plenty more downstairs, so eat up. Lunch is ready, too. I'll bring it up soon."

"You're the best, Mrs. Inoue! You're gorgeous!"

Ryuto had really warmed up to my mom. And she was talking to him more casually than she had with either Tohko or Kotobuki. I couldn't believe it, but her cheeks were flushing at his bald-faced flattery.

Ryuto picked Kotobuki's lemon meringue pie up in his hand and bit into it.

Kotobuki flinched again.

“Whoa…,” he murmured, impressed. He kept on eating, savoring every morsel of it.

Kotobuki looked away from Ryuto as if she couldn’t stand to watch him and dug her fingers into the fabric of her skirt, her entire body stiffening. Each time Ryuto murmured something or shifted his legs, her shoulders shrank in on themselves slightly, and she looked as if she was fighting back tears. Kotobuki seemed to be caught up in the prickling tension of the atmosphere.

Watching her made me feel uneasy.

Once he’d polished off his piece of pie, Ryuto licked his fingers.

“That was great, thanks. If it were just a contest of cookin’ skills, you’d have Tohko totally beat. She went to all that trouble to make Konoha cream puffs, and then she switched up the salt and the sugar on ’em. She was in the dumps the whole rest of the night. I took a nibble off one of the ones she left for us, and it was absolutely disgustin’. No way you could eat that. I wouldn’t even feed it to a dog.”

The air grew even more tense.

I was flustered, but Ryuto stared at me with a mockingly sweet look.

“But you ate every last one of them, Konoha.”

Kotobuki’s face twisted almost to the point of shattering.

“Ryuto, don’t—!”

I tried to stop him, but he talked right over me.

“No one coulda finished that stuff without somethin’ special. I guess there was *some* payoff for Tohko goin’ to the trouble of makin’ cream puff shells every night, huh? At first they didn’t puff up at all. They were as flat as Tohko’s chest. She remade them a bunch of times—so for a while there, I got to have burned, deflated cream puff shells for breakfast. By the time they finally started fluffin’ up right, she was bustlin’ all over in front of the oven.

“If only she hadn’t mixed up the ingredients for the custard, they woulda been perfect.

“Well, I guess that’s Tohko’s style, to end on a punch line by mixin’ up salt and

sugar. And thanks to that, we got a great look at how you feel, Konoha."

He curled his mouth into a sly smile.

"I wanna thank you for eatin' all those horrible things, K."

Kotobuki was trembling.

My stomach felt like it was on fire, too. I didn't know what Ryuto was trying to accomplish. But I had to do something to protect Kotobuki. Consumed by that sense of purpose, I spoke up fiercely.

"If Kotobuki had mixed up the salt and sugar in her lemon meringue pie, I would have finished that, too!"

Kotobuki's face jerked up. Her eyes looked shocked, then shifted, brimming with tears.

"Kotobuki put a lot of work into making this pie for me, too."

At that, she nodded, her face bright red.

"I-I wanted you to enjoy it."

"Ooh, this is gettin' steamy," Ryuto said, his voice deliberately loud, and thunked his elbows roughly down on the table. "I guess every couple is cutesy when they first start goin' out. But from what I've seen, you two ain't very compatible."

He got a mocking look on his face.

"I-I don't need to hear that from someone like you!"

Kotobuki stood up, her fists clenched, as if she was reaching her limit.

I watched astounded as she yelled shrilly at him, her entire body shaking, her face pinched into a tight glare, fixed with burning intensity on Ryuto.

"Why—*why* do you keep saying how Inoue and I aren't good for each other?! How Inoue's forcing himself to be with me, or—or that he doesn't look like he's having fun, or that we've got different styles, or that we're not on the same wavelength! What right do you have? How dare you force your way into Inoue's house to harass us! What a terrible person! Do I bug you that much?"

"Oh no, I *love* good-lookin' girls. But gettin' mad shows you got no confidence.

You know that, too,” Ryuto told her bluntly, a mocking smile still plastered on his face.

I watched their exchange, conflicted. What did she mean, “keep saying”?

Had Ryuto routinely been telling Kotobuki stuff like this?

“Sure he’s goin’ out with ya, but Konoha’s bein’ polite and won’t tell you what he’s actually thinkin’. You’re not winnin’ him over. You never quit bein’ tense, so the conversation’s always strained. So even if you are goin’ out, you’re not havin’ any fun, are ya? Couples like that get tired of each other and break up pretty quick. But when Konoha’s with Tohko, all the tension goes out of him and he looks like he’s enjoyin’ himself a zillion times more.”

“Y-you don’t—”

“You’re totally wrong! I’m going out with Kotobuki ’cos I like her.”

With an arrogant look, Ryuto said, “You like her? Are you sure you’re not just telling yourself that? Was it like that with Miu? It was different, wasn’t it? You had way more intense feelings burnin’ you up, right?”

His words dug mercilessly into my chest. It was true. The feelings I’d had for Miu were very different from the feelings I had for Kotobuki. With Miu, I had been more intense. I’d loved her so much it filled my heart, was more than I could bear, and I’d wanted to take her whole self into my arms. My feelings for Kotobuki were quiet and peaceful. But—

Ryuto looked up at Kotobuki and smiled.

It was different from the poisonous smiles he’d been giving her—it was captivating and charming, innocent, fresh.

“You should break up with Konoha now so you don’t get hurt later on. A sweet thing like you could find a new guy in no time. In which case, you wanna go out with me?”

Kotobuki picked up her slice of pie and shoved it into Ryuto’s face. The whipped cream and meringue splattered over Ryuto’s face.

“Y-you’ve gotta be kidding me! Just stop thinking about me! Don’t ever come to the library again!”

She shouted, at the very limit of her nerves, and then she grabbed her coat and bag and ran out of the room.

“Kotobuki, wait!”

I ran after her, and at the top of the stairs, I grabbed her shoulder. But in a

tearful voice, she said, “I-I’m sorry… I’m going to go home. I’m sorry. I’m really sorry,” and I couldn’t do anything else to stop her.

I watched her small frame run down the stairs, feeling a heart-wrenching frustration.

When I went back to my room, Ryuto was wiping the lemon meringue pie off his face with his fingers.

“How could you be that mean, Ryuto? Why would you say those things to Kotobuki? Why did you even come here?”

“Obviously I came *to get in your way*,” he replied calmly, licking off a cream-covered finger.

I gaped, speechless.

“I heard a rumor that Kotobuki was comin’ over to your house today, so I figured out when she was comin’ and barged my way in.”

He said it evenly, as if he felt not even a shred of remorse.

A faint chill trickling down my spine, I asked, “Why would you do that?”

That made Ryuto look straight at me.

Being stared at by those almost angry, almost irritated, intense eyes, I quailed and froze into stone.

“ ’Cos you’re goin’ out with her. Even though you’re Tohko’s author.”

His voice was harsher than I’d ever heard it, and it coiled around my throat, digging into my skin like a black snake. The pain and shock of it made my brain burn.

Ryuto stood up.

His face was higher than mine now, and he glared at me as I cowered.

“Don’t forget that, please. You are Tohko’s author.”

He said it in a whisper, then left the room.

Feeling as if I’d been staring into a hot wind, I watched the door he’d left wide-open.

What are you talking about, Ryuto?

Chapter 2—The Day You Betrayed Me

“Aaargh, Ryu really went to your house after all?”

It was the next day.

I’d gone to school early and was talking to Takeda in the deserted library.

The night before, I’d texted her that I wanted to talk about Ryuto, and she’d responded, I’ll leave the door to the library unlocked. Swing on by before homeroom.

“Ryu’s been picking on Nanase a reeeal long time, so I thought he might go.”

I gaped as she told me all this in a breezy, high-pitched, childlike voice.

“Ryuto wasn’t coming here to see you?!”

“Nooope. He was after Nanase, not me. At first he would flirt with her like he does with everybody, but Nanase was totally focused on you and she starts to dislike people so easily, so even Ryu couldn’t get things to go the way they usually do. Nanase didn’t budge an inch. It was *really* fun to watch. So then Ryu gave up on trying to seduce her and started picking on her, telling her all kinds of stuff to make her nervous. It looked like that tactic worked pretty well.”

“Why would he do that?”

“Because he wanted to make her break up with you, no?”

“ ’Cos you’re goin’ out with her. Even though you’re Tohko’s author.” I recalled vividly what Ryuto had said to me, glaring at me intensely, and goose bumps prickled on the back of my neck.

I couldn’t believe Ryuto and Kotobuki had been talking like that without me

knowing!

Although when I'd asked Kotobuki about Ryuto, she'd hung her head and looked troubled.

I felt such rage at my blindness that it was like my stomach was boiling.

"Why didn't you tell me about it, Takeda?"

Takeda laughed airily.

"Come on, I'm Ryu's girlfriend. I could never tattle on my man."

"Well, I heard Ryuto was going out with other girls, too."

"He sure is."

Her eyes crinkled innocently, like a puppy's.

"See, when I say I'm his girlfriend, it's 'semi.' It's more like I'm his accomplice, I guess."

I felt another chill at the word *accomplice*.

"You don't mean you were harassing Kotobuki, too, do you?"

Takeda had caused Kotobuki to fall down the stairs at the hospital before.

As I paled, Takeda laughed harshly.

"Oh, no way. I didn't do anything this time! Besides, if I had to pick, I'd say I'm supporting Nanase right now. She didn't let that Asakura girl beat her, and even though she knows what I did to her—even though she found out I'm a liar—she didn't change. I was a little bit impressed at how strong she is, despite her weakness."

Takeda told me all this with a sunny look on her face, and I felt conflicted, wondering if I could believe what she was saying.

"I'm sorry!"

When I apologized to her during a break between classes, Kotobuki's eyes went wide.

"I didn't do a very good job of protecting you yesterday, and I'm sorry. And I'm really sorry that I didn't pick up on the fact that Ryuto was saying all that stuff to

you.”

“It-it’s not your fault. Actually, I-I’m sorry I left so suddenly yesterday. What he was saying wasn’t even that bad. I just couldn’t deal with it right then.”

Kotobuki was flustered. Her lowered eyes, which seemed ready to burst with tears, sent a knife through my heart.

“Sakurai was right; it’s because I have no confidence. And you do look like you’re better suited to Tohko. When I found out Tohko brought cream puffs to your house, I thought maybe she…”

“It’s not like that. Tohko only thinks of me as her errand boy.”

Kotobuki looked up and smiled brightly. I knew she was forcing herself to do it, but she was doing her best to keep me from worrying. The corners of her mouth trembled slightly.

“You’re right. Tohko’s got her boyfriend in Hokkaido. She told me he’s a great guy who looks really good in a white scarf. It would be weird for her to get jealous given that.”

I knew that Tohko had said that only to look cool.

She didn’t have a boyfriend.

“Yeah… exactly.”

But I couldn’t tell Kotobuki that. I nodded.

“I’ll try harder! I mean… um… so that you can be more comfortable than you are with Tohko.”

I watched her make this admirable declaration, and my throat tightened and my chest ached.

Kotobuki had said the same thing about Miu. I’d unintentionally pushed Kotobuki away, but she’d believed in me to the end and made me stronger.

I was the one who needed to step it up.

To appreciate Kotobuki. To care for her even more. Next time, I was going to protect her!

After school, Kotobuki went home with her friends. She said they’d made plans

to go shopping.

“We can go home together tomorrow!”

“Okay. Let’s go somewhere on the way home then.”

“O-okay. Definitely.”

Kotobuki reached out for my hand covertly, shyly, so that no one would see, and I touched hers. I left the classroom a little after her.

Instead of going to the book club, I went straight to the front doors, put on my street shoes, and went outside.

It was February, but the cold hadn’t alleviated at all. The air was sharply dry and cold. It felt as if it were scraping at my skin.

I gripped my cell phone in my numb hand and called Ryuto’s number.

I was going to ask him not to bother Kotobuki anymore. And I was going to tell him that I *wasn’t* Tohko’s author and I had no intention of ever writing a novel again.

As the phone was ringing, I walked through the school gate.

“Inoue?”

An adult voice called my name.

I turned around, my cell phone still at my ear.

A car passed by on the road next to me with a loud roar.

Standing starkly among the winter-blasted trees that lined the sidewalk was a placid-looking man. He was older than my father and wore a dark brown suit.

“It’s been a while, hasn’t it, Inoue? Do you remember me?”

His soft voice, like dry leaves falling in the breeze, dragged over my skin—over my heart.

Of course I hadn’t forgotten him.

The greeting on Ryuto’s voice mail was playing in my ear, but it grew fuzzier and more distant and I became aware of the pulse of time passing, then winding backward.

A deep darkness assaulted me from the past, despair like an echoing scream that pierced the sky—a shadow fell across my vision and my heart stopped.

I was frozen in place. The person before me was the man who had been Miu Inoue's agent.

It was the spring of my third year in middle school.

A fourteen-year-old girl named Miu Inoue had been chosen for the top spot in a literary magazine's new author competition, the youngest winner in its history, and the story had made the news.

The winning story was made into a book, and the moment it went on sale it became a best seller, was made into a movie and a TV series, both of which were major hits that broke records. It got to the point that people said the story was a social phenomenon.

The publishing company hid Miu Inoue's true identity, didn't even reveal her sex, nothing but the fact that she was fourteen. Although that whipped up the readers' curiosity even more and people said she was a coddled, bookish rich girl who had never lifted anything heavier than a pen.

Then Miu vanished without ever publishing another book.

That's because Miu Inoue was neither a coddled rich girl nor a book girl spilling over with talent: She was ordinary middle school student Konoha Inoue—me.

"It must be almost three years now."

At a coffee shop frequented by adults, I sat across from the man who had been my agent.

The shop's interior was made to look antique with soft velvet couch cushions and dim lighting. The white steam of my drink tickled my nose with the pungent aroma of coffee.

Mr. Sasaki gazed at me, an elegant cup with a green-and-turquoise pattern on it in his hand, then murmured nostalgically, "When I first met you, I was surprised that a middle school student could have actually written that book.

"At the same time, I realized that perhaps no one but that boy could have written it. I think that story—it may be that only you, only at age fourteen, could

have written it. Even now I consider myself extremely fortunate to have been involved in making it into a book."

The corners of his eyes crinkled and his face became gentle. He was no different from two years ago.

The memories of days gone by made something deep in my chest ache.

This person had never blamed me.

I'd been oppressed by the pretense of being a creative genius at the age of fourteen, and my heart was destroyed by Miu jumping off a roof right in front of me. I had started having attacks where I couldn't breathe, or I'd sobbed that I couldn't write anymore, that I hated books, and he had looked at me with a deep gaze, as if he, too, was hurting.

I don't remember what we talked about the last time we'd spoken.

I kept repeating that I didn't want to see anyone, buried under blankets, shaking and curled up in my bed in my room with the curtains closed. It got so that people stopped coming to see me.

My life had ended for the first time then.

I took a mouthful of coffee and tasted its bitterness.

I was seized by the bizarre feeling that the past was wavering before me like a mirage, though I had sworn I would never go back there.

My fourteen-year-old self was looking uneasily at me through the steam rising from my cup.

Though it was intangible, the pain that lingered in my heart was sharp.

"I never expected you to say that to me. I caused you so many problems…"

I hadn't had any sense of responsibility. I'd been a child.

But at the time I was unable to write a single word.

Something sad came into Mr. Sasaki's eyes.

"A lot of authors are sensitive people. Even adults feel the pressure and lose the ability to write under the stress. And I would say that in middle school, you faced many more difficulties.

“The first time we spoke, I thought you were a young man with a very pure, gentle heart.

“I wanted to help you grow up right, so you could stay like that without getting hurt. That’s why we didn’t publish a single profile on you. To protect you. But maybe that haunted you more. The name Miu Inoue got to be too big.”

Mr. Sasaki lowered his eyes and tightened his fingers around his coffee cup.

“It’s an editor’s job to get an author to write good stories, but I wasn’t able to do that. I hurt you so badly that you said you didn’t want to write anymore. As your agent, I share the fault for losing Miu Inoue. I apologize.”

Seeing him bow his head to me, my chest filled with remorse. I was the one who’d been unable to meet *his* expectations.

And I’d thought they sold Miu Inoue as a masked author because it was good for publicity. I hadn’t known that Mr. Sasaki was trying to protect me. I really had been a stupid, powerless child. I’d been unable to understand anything, and all I did was run away.

My voice strong, I said, “There’s no reason to be sorry. Like you said, I could only have written that novel then, when I was fourteen. A middle school kid who barely knew the rules of grammar managed to write something that felt like writing a diary, almost by accident—that’s all it was. It wasn’t my actual skill—so I never had the talent to write a sequel.”

“I wonder.”

Mr. Sasaki looked at me, his face frank, and his voice came out thickly.

“I don’t think that’s true. I’ve always hoped that you would start to write again.”

“I…”

My hands trembled slightly and my whisper of a voice was rough. Mr. Sasaki’s earnest gaze was right in front of me.

“Do you think we could work together again? It’s been more than two years since it happened. Couldn’t you write another story now?”

Write a novel? Again?

A sharp pang pierced the core of my brain like an arrow.

Me? Write again?

In the growing, aching heat of my brain, Tohko's face appeared.

"When you write your novel, let me read it, okay?"

She had said that to me so kindly.

But a novel—I—

Intense pain, as if a hand had seized my heart in its grip and were squeezing it out between its fingers. And terror, as if I had been cast into utter darkness. They assaulted me in raging waves.

I had stopped denying Miu Inoue's novel. That night at the planetarium, I had sworn to move into the future.

But it was a future I would reach as Konoha Inoue, not Miu Inoue!

Miu Inoue didn't exist at the end of the path I would go down.

The one thing I was not going to be was an author.

Tohko's face, Miu's face, and Kotobuki's face as she held back tears—they rose up alternately in my mind.

I wasn't going to lose anything ever again.

Not the peaceful, easy life I led day to day, not my true and honest friends, and not my awkward yet kind girlfriend who cared about me.

"Don't forget that, please. You are Tohko's author."

I shook off Ryuto's voice, hard.

The only thing left in my mind was the image of Kotobuki smiling awkwardly.

Of the girlfriend whom I had just decided I would treasure.

I wasn't going to fail again! I was going to live my life as Konoha Inoue, protecting the people I cared about!

I looked back into Mr. Sasaki's eyes and forced myself to smile.

"Thank you. I feel fortunate to have you ask me that. But I'm satisfied with

myself now, not being Miu Inoue. I'm happy now, so I won't go back to being that person. And I'm not going to write any novels."

For one moment…

… I felt as if Tohko's voice were tickling at my ear.

But I couldn't tell what emotion was behind it or what she said.

"If you change your mind, I'd like you to contact me."

When I got home, I crumpled up the business card Mr. Sasaki had given me and threw it in the trash.

That night, when I descended from my room on the second floor to take a bath, the doorbell rang, announcing a visitor.

It was close to nine o'clock. Who could it be at this hour?

When I peered through the peephole on the front door, I saw long braids.

My heart almost stopped. I quickly undid the chain and opened the door.

A wave of cold air blew in from outside, stabbing at my skin and making my bones shake. In the freezing darkness stood Tohko, pale as if with illness, breathing in white clouds, her shoulders heaving.

She had once insisted that every time she left the house she had to wear her uniform, but now she was wearing a sweater and a long skirt under her navy-blue duffle coat.

That was strange enough, but one of her braids was half unraveled and wild, and her purplish lips were trembling. Her brows were tightly knit, and in her black eyes, fixed on me, I saw flashes of fierce pain and despair.

I'd never seen Tohko look this way before!

"What happened?"

Tohko's face crumpled and she looked like she was about to cry. Then she reached out with both hands and grabbed on to my chest.

The instant her white fingertips brushed my throat, I got goose bumps at their icicle frigidity.

“Why?!” she begged, her voice hoarse like a broken flute, and immediately she began to cough.

She clung to my shirt the entire time as she coughed roughly, tears gathering in the corners of her eyes. Her pale fingers trembled.

“Just come inside. You’ll catch cold if we stand here talking!”

She was swaying like a ghost, and I put my arm around her shoulders and tried to lead her up to my room on the second floor, but Tohko shook her head violently and wouldn’t move.

“Why, Konoha?!”

Her shoulders felt shockingly thin and cold under my arm. Had Tohko always been this frail? Had her shoulders always been so weak?

“Why?! Why?!”

She pleaded like a child, grabbing my arm with both hands. She looked up at me plaintively, her eyes swimming with tears and her jaw clenched tight in pain.

The wind blew through the open door in knifelike gusts, scraping at my skin. Tohko’s streaming hair hit my face more than once. Her panting breath turned cloudy white as soon as she exhaled.

My mind was in chaos and refused to function. Why did Tohko look so tortured? What was she trying to tell me? In any case, if I didn’t get her upstairs, my mother was going to find us.

When I started trying to drag her upstairs, Tohko yanked hard on my arm and moaned.

“Why… why did you tell Mr. Sasaki that you were never going to write again? Are you really never going to write another novel?”

The shock cut through my body like a knife.

Mr. Sasaki?!

Why was his name coming up at a time like this? Not to mention—! How did she know that I’d run into Mr. Sasaki or what we’d talked about?

Did Tohko know Mr. Sasaki?!

The events of today, the events of the past, names, faces swirled chaotically in tendrils of fire inside my mind.

I stood rigidly, unsure of what I should say or how, and Tohko screamed shrilly at me.

“How could you—to think that you’d never write again—why?! Why, Konoha? Why would you say that you won’t write?”

Grabbing hold of my arm, Tohko swung it back and forth with all her strength. She asked me, “Why? Why?” over and over, her eyes tinged with despair and pain.

How? How did Tohko know about Mr. Sasaki?

Letting myself be shaken, her unraveled braid and thin shoulders jumped in and out of my line of sight again and again. Tohko’s face was twisted and she was screaming!

“Why would you say that you wouldn’t go back to Miu Inoue?! Didn’t Mr. Sasaki tell you that you could probably write another book now? That you should try writing again—”

How did she know this? How was it possible?! How did she know that I’d seen Mr. Sasaki?!

My heart lurched.

Tohko who always smiled so placidly, Tohko who murmured kindly to me when I was in pain—she was criticizing me, assaulting my emotions, attacking me, looking like she was going to cry!

“Why, why did you turn him down?! Why did you throw it away?! How could you possibly say that you have no talent?!”

Her body was freezing cold, but her grip on my arm was hot and painful. It felt like my brain, my heart, everything was burning. My throat ached.

Footsteps approached us. “What’s all this noise, Konoha?”

I shouted, “It’s nothing!” then shoved Tohko through the door; I went out, too, in only my socks, and shut the door.

The fierce sounds beating at me erased my mother's voice calling, "Konoha!"

"You *knew* about Mr. Sasaki?!"

My voice was so harsh it even made me shudder.

In the darkness faintly illuminated by the streetlight, Tohko's eyes opened wide.

The wind swirled around us with a moan.

"Have you *always* known that I was Miu Inoue?!"

Tohko didn't answer.

Her brows still firmly knit, she looked at me with an expression of intense anguish.

"Is that true? Did you know? And you got closer to me in order to make me write another book? And when you dragged me into the book club and made me write improv stories and kept me with you all the time, you had your eye on my next book!"

It wasn't true! It couldn't be that simple!

Why wasn't she saying anything?

Why was she looking at me with such pain in her eyes?

I wanted her to tell me it wasn't true, that I'd made a mistake. Tohko had been at my side whenever suffering had debilitated me. She had clasped my hand in her own gentle grip, had embraced my spirit and helped me to stand.

My mother had said that we owed Tohko a lot. And she was right; without Tohko I never would have made it this far.

However broken I was, however dark and unknown the path, even if I felt that I was isolated and alone, Tohko smiled the same as ever and she at least would reach her hand out to me.

No matter who got tired of me, no matter who cast me off, no matter who forgot me, Tohko would always be on my side.

At some point, that conviction had put down deep roots in my heart.

Because Tohko had always helped me out.

The person I thought I could trust more than any other, the person I thought would absolutely never betray me—she was speaking aloud of her betrayal, right to my face.

Saying the things I least wanted to hear in all the world—"write a novel," "be Miu Inoue again," "be an author."

Telling me that she had guided me to this point for that very reason.

"You knew about Miu Inoue's first draft because Mr. Sasaki showed it to you, didn't he? Why didn't you tell me?! Because you were keeping your guard up against me?! Were you tricking me?!"

I didn't want to say these things. But I couldn't stop myself.

It seemed as if Tohko was growing smaller and frailer. Her lips pressed shut and she looked up at me in agony under the moon and lamplight. All the strength went out of her grip, and her hands fell away from my arm.

I grabbed her shoulders—they felt so thin they might shatter—and as I shook her, my heart continued to scream at her. The words were all but a prayer.

Please! Make some excuse! Deny what I said! Tell me it wasn't a betrayal!

I didn't think that the love and kindness that Tohko had shown me up till now

had all been faked. She had been like a mother or an older sister to me. She couldn't have worried about me or helped me like that purely for a lie! There must have been something real there.

Explain yourself! Make me understand!

But Tohko didn't say anything. No matter how I berated her, no matter how I grilled her, she kept her jaw clenched, knit her brows tightly, and looked at me, as if to withstand the pain closing in on her.

It felt like an admission to my suspicions. The world went dark. My throat stung as if it were tearing itself apart.

"I… will *never* write a novel."

Then, with a sense of despair that could have torn my heart to shreds, I looked down upon the fierce disappointment, the pain, the scream that found no voice, which appeared instantly in Tohko's eyes, that she wore on her face.

Terror, pain, sadness entirely cloaked in inky darkness and crumbling away.

My voice croaked; neither insults nor pleas would come anymore.

I wouldn't write! I would never write!

Novels would always take so much from me. I was tired of losing things. What was so wrong about wanting to live my life as Konoha Inoue?!

With a look of utter, bone-deep exhaustion on her face, Tohko released her grip on my arm.

In the darkness where the cold wind blew, Tohko murmured, her voice catching, her eyes hollow, as if she were speaking the words of a final prayer, as yet undaunted, to a merciless god.

"… Even so… even so… you have to write."

Her unraveled braid fell feather-like over her shoulder. She turned around listlessly, keeping her head bowed, pushed aside the gate, and left.

I stood rooted in place and listened to the faint creak of the gate, watching the slender figure disappear into the darkness.

Then, once I'd completely lost sight of her, the strength went out of my knees,

and I huddled down in front of the door and bowed my head.

My mother peppered me with questions, asking me, “Who was that? What happened?” but all I could say was “It wasn’t important.” Seeing how very pale I’d become, my mother pressed her lips together worriedly.

I turned out the lights in my room and lay down, but I didn’t have a chance of falling asleep.

Pain pulsed through my chest like a searing flame, my throat felt like it was going to pull itself apart, and Tohko’s voice played on an endless refrain in my ears.

“You have to write.”

“You have to.”

“Have to write.”

“You need to.”

Just stop!

I don’t want to write! I don’t want to!

I dug my fingers into the sheets and ground my teeth together. Just then, my cell phone rang with an incoming call. The solemn, dignified tune reminded me of a hymn as it echoed through the dark room.

I’d forgotten to silence my phone.

I sat up and grabbed the phone off my desk, then looked at the caller.

It was Ryuto!

I held my breath and pushed the call button.

“… Hello.”

“Tohko is depressed, y’know.”

I heard his low, muffled voice on the other end of the flimsy phone, and my heart clenched.

“She’s locked in her room… lookin’ sick—I even offered her a book, and she just said, ‘No thanks.’ ”

There wasn't a trace of Ryuto's usual cheerfulness in his voice; it was dark and harsh enough to make my skin prickle.

"I'm pretty sure I can guess what went down."

"Tohko said—"

She lied to me! She told me to write!

I was just about to let my emotions take control and tell him everything when a voice beat against my ear as heavy as lead.

"You runnin' away?"

My mouth dried out instantly.

"You're the one who let her dream. You wrote her those stories and let her read 'em and made her get her hopes up—and now you're gonna say no more writin' and back out?"

The cold night air rolled over my skin, quickly stealing the heat from my body.

What… what was he saying?

"You gonna just… forget all about it? Treat it like a memory, and let yourself be the only one who's happy with your beautiful girlfriend? Juliette got shredded and went crazy. Jerome took poison. And Alissa went through the narrow gate alone!"

His voice was getting progressively sharper and more violent.

"What are you talking about? Alissa or Juliette or whatever—what does that mean?!"

"Of course, you don't know a thing, do ya, Konoha? She shielded you and coddled you that way. And yet you're gonna betray her? You're gonna shut Tohko out before she even exists? I'm not gonna let you do that!"

Before she even exists? Did he mean Tohko doesn't?!

I didn't understand.

My heart was pounding wildly, and my hand was sweating against the cell phone.

Ryuto spoke once again, his voice deep enough to furrow the earth.

“Up till now, I’ve been readin’ the story of Tohko Amano and Konoha Inoue. But from now on, I’m gonna be the writer and I’m gonna make the story. Miu Inoue needs to write. Otherwise Tohko Amano’s gonna disappear.”

The call ended with an abrupt click.

When I came to my senses, my throat was sticky and dry and my entire body was soaked in sweat. My pajamas clung to my skin.

“Tohko Amano’s gonna disappear.”

Ryuto’s voice echoed unpleasantly in my mind.

“Tohko Amano’s gonna disappear.”

Please, Kana?

Could you stop looking so annoyed whenever Tohko calls you “Aunt Kanako”?

You stared at Tohko once when she was eating, and when she held out a piece of paper and asked, “Do you want some, too, Aunt Kanako?” you scowled and turned away.

From Tohko or little Ryu’s perspective, you and I are grand old dames.

It’s bizarre how much you let it bother you when she calls you “aunt.”

And I think it’s childish of you to make Ryu call you “Kanako.”

After Tohko started elementary school, she became much more obsessed about food. She would devour the stories I wrote her every single day.

“I want more, Mommy. What happened to the brother and sister squirrels next? Please, Mommy, write it, write it!”

She would pester me with her sparkling eyes, so I was in a tough position. No matter how much I wrote her, it was always “more, more.”

But I do think she’s having a hard time with lunchtime at school. She still comes home crying.

“Everybody was saying how good the stew was and how good the pudding

was. But I couldn't taste anything. When I said that, they told me I was weird and they laughed at me.

"Why am I different from them? Doesn't everybody eat books? If I eat stew or pudding, am I not gonna know if it tastes good?

"I don't want to eat the school lunch anymore. But if I don't eat it, I have to eat by myself after the very end of cleanup after school. Otherwise the teacher scolds me.

"The boys tease me about eating lunch alone all the time.

"And if I act very brave like Bastian in *The Neverending Story* and tell them that *actually* books taste waaay better, they call me a goblin for eating books.

"Am I a goblin, Mommy? I hate the boys because they tease me. I hate lunchtime, too. I don't want to go to school!"

She hunched up into a ball at the front door and let her tears fall.

And so I held Tohko in my arms and stroked her head and gently told her this: "You were such a good girl to stick it out and eat your lunch. You aren't a goblin. You're an ordinary little girl. You're just a book girl who loves books so much she devours them."

Chapter 3—A Very High Place Filled with Light

“I’m trying to figure out what kind of chocolate I should make for Valentine’s Day. Do you prefer chocolate that’s not too sweet? You don’t hate it if there’s dried fruit in it, right? If you have any requests, let me know.”

“No, I like dried fruit. I’ll eat anything.”

When Kotobuki started talking to me excitedly in class the next morning, I answered halfheartedly. My mind was taken up by Tohko’s visit the night before and Ryuto’s phone call.

Tohko was going to disappear? What did that mean? Ryuto said he was going to become the writer—what was he planning to do?

“Inoue? Are you listening?”

“Huh?”

I snapped out of it and saw Kotobuki glaring at me, her lips pursed.

“Oh, sorry. We were talking about chocolate. Anything’s fine with me.”

“Argh! Telling me anything is fine makes me do more work than anything else you could say.”

Her lips pursed even more.

“Um, well, I guess I like bitter chocolate better. Something simple without nuts or anything in it.”

She gave me an instantaneous, excited smile.

“O-okay. Some simple, bitter chocolate. I can do that.”

The number of people in the room was increasing and it was getting louder.

Ordinarily she would suddenly start acting gruff and hurry to get away from me, but today she didn't budge from my desk. She kept on standing there, her cheekbones flushed in embarrassment.

"Mornin', Nanase! Mornin', Inoue!"

Mori called out to us chipperly.

"What's going on? You guys talking about Valentine's Day? It's pretty early in the morning for things to get so steamy."

"M-Mori! Let's go over there."

Kotobuki put an arm around Mori and tried to pull her away from me.

"Y'know, if you guys are planning things out, you might be able to swing trying Nanase's chocolate cake at her house, fresh out of the oven," Mori said brightly as she was being dragged away.

"Mori!"

"You visit the boyfriend's house, then next is the invitation to the girlfriend's house, right? Valentine's Day is the perfect chance to take the next step in your relationship. You should use any move you've got."

"L-let's see if we got the same answers on our homework, Mori."

Her face scarlet, Kotobuki yanked Mori away.

Once I was alone, I sank back into thought. About Tohko… about Ryuto…

About how Ryuto had mentioned Juliette and Jerome and Alissa…

"Juliette got shredded and went crazy. Jerome took poison. And Alissa went through the narrow gate alone!"

What had he meant by that?

Was Juliette the one from Shakespeare? But what about Jerome? And Alissa?

"Konoha?"

Someone called my name and I jumped.

I turned around and saw Takeda sticking her head in the back door, waving at me to come over.

When I'd hurried out to the hall, she handed me a book with a library sticker on it.

I saw the title *The Narrow Gate* and my heart leaped into my throat.

Alissa went through the narrow gate! Was this—?

Takeda beamed at me like an innocent puppy.

"I'm bringing a message from Ryu. He asked me to give you this book."

"Takeda, what is Ryuto thinking?"

"I don't know. I'm just a tool for him," she answered, all smiles. "Oh, but I'm using Ryu, too, so I guess it's fair."

"Using him?"

" 'Cos Ryu asked me to go out with him even though he knows what I'm really like. I can relax and I have fun when I'm with him. He lets me pretend to be his girlfriend."

"Doesn't that mean you're starting to like him?"

The smile slipped from Takeda's face and she became a blank.

"… I… don't think so. Besides, there's someone else Ryu likes."

"What?!"

Takeda's voice was filled with such certainty that I was drawn in despite myself.

She put her mask back on and laughed innocently.

"Not any of the girls he messes around with. He's definitely got someone special who he actually, honestly likes, but he can't tell her how he feels. And since he can't have her, he's looking for a girl who'll love him and him alone. Everybody is just a replacement for her."

My heart rate sped up and my brain grew hotter.

Was she talking about Amemiya?

No.

Ryuto had said that Amemiya "might have become someone special." So then

the person Ryuto truly loved was— With a shock like a slap in the face, I remembered Ryuto gazing glowingly at Tohko. He would make breezy excuses to Tohko, who pouted and scolded him every time he flirted with girls, and when he got smacked on the head yet again, he seemed to be enjoying it.

The two of them had grown up together, and they still lived in the same house.

Could it be that Tohko was the one Ryuto loved?

“I’m going to head off now, okay? Homeroom’s about to start.”

Takeda’s voice was bright before she drew her face close to my ear and whispered, “Ryu can be scary when he gets serious about something. So please be careful.”

The bell chimed overhead.

I was staring blankly after Takeda as she pattered off like a puppy when someone grabbed my shoulder from behind.

“What’s up, Inoue? Didn’t you hear the bell?”

“Akutagawa…”

“Did something happen?”

Seeing my absentminded state, Akutagawa furrowed his brows.

“No, it’s nothing. I was up late last night and didn’t sleep much.”

“All right, but…”

I couldn’t even talk to Akutagawa about Tohko.

“The teacher’s coming. Let’s get back to the room.”

“Yeah…”

I started to walk, Akutagawa pushing at my back. His face was pinched with concern. Before we sat down, he glanced down at the book in my hand and murmured, “*Strait Is the Gate*… that’s by Gide, right?”

“I got this sudden urge to read it. I asked Takeda about it and she brought it up here for me.”

Akutagawa’s eyebrows drew together slightly again, and his expression turned

thoughtful, as if something had caught his curiosity.

“Why did you want to read that book?”

“I dunno, just an urge.”

“I see… then I guess it’s just a coincidence.”

I couldn’t hear the last part of what he said very well. The teacher came in and Akutagawa went back to his desk.

I was in no mood to pay attention to the class. I hid the book Takeda had given me behind my textbook and immersed myself in reading it, holding my breath.

The author was André Gide. He was a French author who had won a Nobel Prize.

The main character who narrated the story was named Jerome. The heroine was named Alissa.

Juliette was the name of Alissa’s younger sister.

Raised in a wealthy family, Jerome had loved his cousin Alissa, who was two years older than him, ever since childhood.

Alissa was a taciturn woman with a strong religious bent. She implored Jerome to become an honorable man who drew closer to God. She refused his offer of marriage in order to accomplish that.

Juliette was the exact opposite of her sister, a cheerful little girl who secretly loved Jerome. But when she found out that her older sister suspected how she felt and wanted to get her to marry Jerome, she decided to step aside and became the wife of a merchant who wasn’t exactly young.

Even so, Alissa made no move to accept Jerome.

The narrow gate came from a verse in the Bible that says, “Make every effort to enter through the narrow gate.”

It continued like so.

“Wide is the gate, which leads to destruction, and broad is its road, and great are the numbers who enter thereby. Narrow is the gate which leads to life and close its road, and few are they who discover it.”

Because the gate that leads to God is so narrow that two people cannot pass through it together, Alissa tells Jerome he must go on by himself. She breathes her last alone, leaving behind a diary in which she writes her true feelings for Jerome.

I continued to read *Strait Is the Gate* through the break and the next class period, as well.

Why did Ryuto have this book delivered to me?

He had told me that Juliette got shredded and had gone crazy. But although the Juliette in the book enters a loveless marriage with a homely, vulgar man, the man she marries is good and generous, and he loved her. She bears many children and winds up happy. After her sister's death, she gives her daughter her name, Alissa.

Plus Jerome never takes any poison. He suffers over his unrequited feelings for Alissa and feels conflicted, but he doesn't try to stop Alissa from pulling away, and he simply accepts the fact that she doesn't love him as *well, that's her answer*.

So what about Alissa?

Lacking any religious inclinations, I couldn't begin to understand why Alissa so stubbornly refused Jerome. I suppose you could say that she was forced to leave him in order to turn him toward God, and she passed through the narrow gate alone.

But how did that relate to me or Tohko?

What was Ryuto trying to tell me?

Once I finished the book, I flipped back through it several times to read parts again, but it only increased my questions.

I'd been reading the book so long that Akutagawa cautioned me mildly, "You oughta stop reading for lunch, at least."

"Oh, sorry."

"I mean, if you're enjoying it, great, but…"

He trailed off. Then he asked me again, "You're sure nothing's bothering you?"

“Y-yeah, I’ll… tell you later,” I murmured vaguely, and so of course Akutagawa watched me with furrowed brows as I ate the lunch my mother had packed for me.

“You were reading all day today, Inoue,” Kotobuki mentioned worriedly, drawing near me during cleanup after school.

It had probably seemed unusual to her, too, that I was turning the pages so voraciously.

“You were reading *Strait is the Gate*… right? Maybe I should read it, too.”

“It’s just another old book. I only got sucked into it so much ’cos I was bored.”

“Oh?” Kotobuki murmured, sounding unconvinced. “We said we were going to go somewhere today after school, remember?”

My stomach clenched tightly.

Could I really go out somewhere with Kotobuki when I felt this unstable?

But Kotobuki’s cheeks were slightly flushed and she looked excited. “Where should we go?”

I couldn’t say that something had come up and I was going home by myself.

“Mori will see us if we leave the classroom together, so would you mind if we meet up at the library like usual?”

“… Okay.”

I couldn’t find a good excuse to avoid hurting Kotobuki’s feelings, so I nodded, feeling weighed down.

After we finished with homeroom and before I went to meet Kotobuki at the library, my feet carried me to the book club room.

It was cold and empty. Tohko wasn’t there.

Tohko—whose braids had come unraveled and blown around wildly, who had gripped my arm, whose eyes had been filled with anguish, who had screamed at me and trembled.

When I recalled her pale face or her voice as she asked me, *“Why?!”* a scarring pain ran through my chest and my breath choked off.

“Why…?”

As soon as I’d spoken the word, my throat closed up, my nostrils flared, and my eyelids burned.

“… Why, Tohko…?”

No—Kotobuki was waiting for me. I had to go right now.

I gritted my teeth and closed the door.

Just then, I sensed someone behind me.

“Inoue?”

I turned around and saw a young woman standing there wearing a coat trimmed with fur at the collar and cuffs. She was a striking beauty with perfect makeup, but I didn’t recognize her.

“Who are you?”

“Oh, it really *is* you! I’m so glad I found you. You weren’t in your classroom, so I thought you’d gone home.”

“Um…”

“Could I borrow your cell phone?”

“What?”

“Hurry.”

When she persisted, I held it out. She slipped it into her hand with a “thanks” and winked at me.

“Well, shall we go?”

“Hold on! Where are you—”

I watched her turn around and start to walk away, shocked.

“You’ll find out when we get there.”

“I’m sorry, I have plans! Can you give me back my cell phone?”

“Ha-ha-ha, not yet.”

That was how we reached the school gates.

What should I do? Kotobuki was waiting for me.

The woman stopped a taxi, then slid into the backseat with seductive poise.

“Get in. Ryu asked me to come and get you.”

My brain felt like it had been set on fire. So she was someone Ryuto knew!

If this was a scene Ryuto had orchestrated, I wasn’t getting in that car! I had to get back to Kotobuki!

And yet my feet moved forward. As if there was nothing else they could have done— When the door slammed shut, a vibrant smile came over her face and she gave the driver the name of a luxury hotel in the city.

Ryu was a good boy and waited for you again today, Kana.

He and Tohko play together as if they really were brother and sister. Ryu toddles after Tohko, his cheeks all rosy, calling, “Cousin Tooohko, cousin Tooohko,” just like a freshly hatched duckling. It’s adorable.

Earlier, Tohko was tearing up Kästner’s *Emil and the Detectives* to eat and he must have thought that was so interesting. He ripped *Emil* up, too, and put it in his mouth.

After he’d chewed on it for a bit, he spat it out and made a face. “That doesn’t taste like cinnamon doughnuts at aaaall!”

“I’ll make you some different doughnuts, Ryu. So don’t eat Tohko’s books anymore.”

When I told him that, he nodded firmly. “Okay, Aunt Yui, I won’t.”

Even so, when Tohko started eating the food I’d written for her for dinner, he watched her intently, sucking on his fingers.

“You’re so cool, Tohko. I wish I could eat Aunt Yui’s stories,” he said enviously.

“But you can eat the rice omelet and hamburger Mommy made you. This is for me, and you can’t have it,” Tohko told him meanly and hugged the paper to her chest. He looked a little crestfallen, then grinned and said, “You’re right! That’s okay, ’cos Aunt Yui’s rice omelet is really good.

“When I grow up, I’m gonna marry Aunt Yui! Then I can eat her food forever and ever and ever!”

When he said that, I suddenly wanted to hug him tight and stroke his cheek.

Ryu is so good and cheerful and absolutely adorable.

Are you busy at work, Kana?

Fumiharu didn’t come home again today. Is he with you by any chance?

I don’t mind watching Ryu a little longer, but you ought to think about him a little more.

When you and Fumiharu get absorbed in your work, you lose sight of everything around you, so I worry.

When we got out of the taxi, the woman went through a revolving glass door and into a building, then left her coat at the front desk.

“Please give me back my cell phone.”

“Nooot yeeet.”

She told me to take my jacket off, too, then handed it to the clerk at the front desk along with my schoolbag. She accepted the ticket to pick them up again, then slipped it into a pocket of her suit.

“Urk. Where’s Ryuto? Just let me see him already.”

The lobby was spacious and its white pillars glowed in the lamplight. The carpet underfoot was so soft it felt like we were sinking into it. I was overcome by the luxurious atmosphere, so strikingly different from the places I ordinarily spent my time. I felt like I was being swallowed up in it.

I regretted coming to a place like this.

I wondered if Kotobuki had gone home yet. She was probably angry at getting stood up.

The woman took an escalator to the lower floors and walked down a hallway decorated with flowers and paintings.

“Please give me my phone. I’m going to talk to Ryuto myself!”

She didn’t turn around. Her pace showed how confident she was that I was following.

She opened a door covered in red velvet, then calmly entered the room beyond.

I chased after her, annoyed.

Instantly a buzz of voices closed around me.

People—

Light—

Voices—sounds—

Every flash melded together in a crush.

It was different from the clamoring noise when you walk through the bustle of the city. It was vibrant and gorgeous and solemn—as if I’d been lost in a world utterly separate from everyday life.

The huge, almost panoramic hall was filled with adults. The men were diverse in expensive-looking suits or casual sweaters, and the women were dressed up in brightly colored suits or lustrous dresses. There were people in traditional kimono, too. Everyone held a sparkling glass in their hand and walked around leisurely, greeting one another or chatting in clumps of a few people.

Party food like terrine and caviar was arranged in the center of the room as well as at its edges. There was a huge vase of flowers on the stage at the front of the room, and a rainbow of flowers spilled out of it like a fountain.

Taking a glass from a waiter, the woman wove through gaps in the crowd.

“W-wait for me!”

I declined a glass of my own and chased after her. I thought I might lose her in the people surging around like gaudy waves, and my feeling of panic heightened.

Suddenly the lights in the room went dark.

My sight was stolen from me and my heart shrank in on itself.

A blinding light came on over the stage, and several men and women ascended and lined up next to one another.

A man who looked like an office worker in his midthirties and wearing a suit. A woman in her early forties clothed in a brown dress that held her body rigid. A man in his late twenties wearing a shirt with leather pants who looked like a freelancer—his eyes were moving around nervously, too.

What was this?

What was about to happen?

The thrumming anxiety running down the back of my neck turned instantly to terror, as if I'd been splashed in cold water, as soon as I saw the name SUMMER'S BREEZE PUBLISHING decorating the stage alongside the words ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION and AWARDS CEREMONY.

This was a party for a publishing company! And the company I'd won the prize with three years ago, at that!

The people standing onstage were the prizewinners, and everyone in the room was either an author or had something to do with the publishing company!

The shock went through my heart and raised cold goose bumps on my skin.

I had the sensation that the dance floor on which I was rooted had split in two and was falling away backward. It turned my mind pure white.

A thick sweat covered me, then chilled instantaneously. I was convulsed with chills that made me almost nauseous.

My vision lurched, my legs grew weak and refused to move. How had I gotten to a place like this?! I had nothing to do with these people!

They introduced the winners; then the man who looked like an office worker, who had won the grand prize, stepped up to the microphone and gave a speech.

"Since I was a child, it has been a dream of mine to be an author. I would like to thank my family for their support, which allowed me to win this award. I'll do my best to continue writing books you'll enjoy."

The winner's excited words ran over my chest like a blade and my heart trembled.

No—I don't want to be here! I hate this! I hate it!

My terror and loathing blended and raged within me like a black storm.

My feet were unsteady, my throat closed up, and I thought I might succumb to suffocation when I heard a murmur in my ear.

“Is it true that Miu Inoue’s at this party?”

I thought my heart might stop.

The voices came at me one after another, like bad hallucinations.

“Didn’t Miu quit being an author?”

“People say she might start writing again.”

“Didn’t she sell more than five million hardcovers and paperbacks combined? No way the company would let her go.”

“I wonder which one is her.”

I realized that I was in my school’s uniform and how much I must stick out in this room full of adults. A greater shudder than ever went through me.

It was a terror that made every hair on my body stand on end and my heart freeze.

For the moment, I was still hidden by the shadows.

But once the room lit up—

I wouldn’t be able to avoid everyone’s curious eyes turning on me. They might figure out that I was Miu Inoue.

Why hadn’t I turned back at the door? How could I get to an exit through these waves of people?

I turned my back to the stage, and in my heart I was ordering my cowardly legs to move when— A regal voice rang out in the hall.

“I believe being an author is a lonely line of work that asks you to pass through a narrow gate quite alone.”

It was a cold voice, as thoroughly transparent as ice created from the purest water.

I was drawn in by the charming voice that seemed to reverberate directly into

my soul; it was impossible to fight. When I looked up at the stage, a slender woman was standing at the microphone.

Her hair was cut crisply short, her gaze was penetrating, her throat slender. Her royal-blue dress flowed along the lines of her body.

This gorgeous woman, a single flower standing nobly awash in the clear light, was someone I had met before.

Yes, I'm positive…

"I doubt you'll manage to survive as an author by relying on family or friends or with a naive nature that curries favor with your readers."

Smirks broke out around me at this stringent declaration that refuted the winner's words right to his face.

"There goes Kanako again."

"Hah. What does she know about being an author? She only sells with her looks and scandals. Her stuff is nothing but shameless exposés. I wouldn't call that a novel."

It was outside Ryuto's house!

I'd had an attack and was brought to the house where Tohko was boarding, and on my way home I'd passed a woman getting out of a cab at the front gate.

"I'm Tohko's underclassman. My name is Inoue."

She had looked at me for an instant when I greeted her, then had turned her eyes away and gone silently into the house.

Tohko had explained that the woman was Ryuto's mother.

The name I heard all around me: Kanako.

And Ryuto's last name was Sakurai—when those two things locked together, I realized who the woman onstage actually was and I felt as if I'd been walloped in the head.

Kanako Sakurai!

She was famous, a best-selling author, and when Miu Inoue had won the grand prize, she'd been one of the judges!

The cold voice I'd just now heard reawakened the review she'd given the prizewinning story at the time.

"The author is still immature and this work contains a spark we see only in adolescence; it is written with a forthright sensitivity and there's good reason to read it. However, there is some question as to whether this author will be capable of producing another piece."

The room brightened and I gasped.

There was no longer anyone onstage.

I instantly recalled the situation I was in, and the terror I had forgotten swelled up in me with a shudder.

"Hey, that kid's wearing a uniform. I wonder who he is?"

The words came to my ears and a chill went up my spine.

I had to get out of here, quick.

I ducked my head and moved through the waves of people desperately, my feet tangling over each other.

I felt like people all over the room were looking at me, and my brain grew hotter and my vision blurred.

Just a little farther, only a little bit more, and I could go out to the lobby.

I panicked and tried to force my way through, which made me collide with the man in front of me.

"I-I'm sorry."

"Oh, excuse me. Hey—are you in high school?"

His eyes went wide.

"That's amazing. Are you working at your age? Are you an author, too? I'm writing novels."

The man brought out a business card. Other people started to gather around us in interest.

"Do you know this kid, Horibe?"

“I was wondering about him, too. You should introduce us.”

“Hey, kid, what’s wrong? Why so quiet? Are you nervous?”

Surrounded by people I didn't know, having them come at me one after another, my breathing grew ragged. Not knowing what to do, I shouted, "I'm sorry, please let me through! I'm in a hurry," my voice choked with tears, and I forced my way through the ring of people.

No longer caring whether I hit anyone, I ran in a daze and finally reached the door. I moved to open the door when someone behind me grabbed my arm.

My heart shrank, and just as I was about to shout out, someone called my name.

"Inoue, wait!"

The person looking down at me, out of breath and dressed in a suit, was Mr. Sasaki.

"I got a message from Ryuto. I was surprised to hear you would be at the party. I'm glad I found you so soon."

In my terror, Mr. Sasaki led me out of the ballroom and took me to the hotel's lounge.

There was space between our seats and others so no one would hear our conversation. The soft lighting and the potted plant next to the couch seemed to hide us, which reassured me, and my tense emotions started to unwind.

"I brought you this."

He set my cell phone and the ticket for my coat on the table.

I suspected that in the end I had behaved exactly as Ryuto had planned, and I felt even more drained. At the same time, I felt a bottomless terror of Ryuto for being able to maneuver the woman he knew and even Mr. Sasaki and to draw me to the party. I felt a chill.

"Do you think Ryuto did something this convoluted just so I would run into you, Mr. Sasaki?"

Mr. Sasaki's face clouded over.

"Now, that I don't know. But don't you think Ryuto wants you to write another novel, too?"

I hung my head.

Did Ryuto want to make me write because that was what Tohko wanted?

Because that was what Ryuto's "special person" wanted?

Something deep in my heart ached, as if something were scraping at it.

"… You knew Ryuto and Tohko, didn't you, Mr. Sasaki?"

Mr. Sasaki's face wrinkled again, troubled.

"Tohko told me that I need to write, too. She knew that I'd seen you."

My voice was a hoarse whisper as I squeezed my phone.

Mr. Sasaki gazed at me with a pained, remorseful look.

"Actually, the reason I went to see you is because Tohko contacted me. Tohko told me she thought you'd be able to write a new novel now."

All that did was tighten my chest even more.

So Tohko really had known that I was Miu Inoue from the very beginning. She'd gotten close to me in order to make me write another book.

"I won't write anything."

Mr. Sasaki sighed.

"I told Tohko that, too. I told her you wouldn't write. I think she took it very badly."

Sweat coated my hand as it squeezed my cell phone. My throat hurt and a pungent smell filled the back of my nose. Without lifting my head, I asked, "How do you know Tohko and Ryuto? Ryuto's mother is that author, Kanako Sakurai, right? Is that the link?"

"There is that. But Tohko's father was a colleague of mine."

"Tohko's… father?"

"That's right—Fumiharu Amano, an excellent editor."

Tohko's father had been an editor!

When I looked up, Mr. Sasaki's eyes were touched by a nostalgic smile.

“I don’t know any editors who love books, who love authors, or who extract their potential as much as he did. The books he made were filled with the love of a creator even in the details of their binding. There were a lot of authors who teamed up with Amano and became best sellers. That was the sort of thing that got him an overblown reputation as an editor of legend.”

There was fondness in Mr. Sasaki’s tone. His eyes had been clouding over, but they began to sparkle visibly. I watched the transformation with an odd feeling.

Mr. Sasaki went on talking effusively.

How all the authors had wanted to work with Amano.

How among them there had been authors with problems, who were selfish and constantly missed deadlines, but that Amano had dealt with them skillfully.

He had fearlessly told people what they needed to hear, had expended all his intelligence and all his power when they needed help, and had built relationships of trust with authors. He had been young, easygoing, and kind with a polite demeanor, but in his job he’d been more passionate than anyone.

Mr. Sasaki sounded as proud as if he were speaking of himself—

“Before a manuscript was finished, he would stay cooped up at the office so long you wondered when he slept, and yet no matter how tired he was, he never got irritable or dismissive of other people.

“In fact, when everyone was on edge, he would tell them, ‘It’s all right; we’ll get through this; keep at it,’ and he would give them a low-key smile. With a calm face that said he didn’t even know he was doing it!

“Then, when the final proofing was done, he would drop onto a couch in the office all of a sudden and sleep right on through to the next day.

“His wife would often bring little Tohko or Ryuto along to visit him with a change of clothes or other provisions. I can still remember how, when he was passed out on the sofa the morning after final proofing, Tohko would shake him and shout at him in the most adorable voice, ‘Daddy, wake up. Let’s go home.’ Tohko started wearing her hair in braids around that time. She really was so cute.”

It was obvious that Mr. Sasaki and Tohko's father shared a lot of good memories and they were welling up in his heart in an unstoppable torrent.

I listened to him as if he were speaking of a distant land, without any of it feeling real.

"Her mother, Yui, was ethereal and cute, too. She was originally in a lower grade at the same college as Amano, and she submitted a novel to him. She was a book girl and she dreamed of being an author. Although at some point, Amano seized his opportunity and made her his personal author."

"When my dad proposed to my mom, he said, 'I want you to be my author. Just mine.' "

The sweet yearning that had come into her clear eyes.

Tohko with a contented smile like a violet.

But the more I heard of Mr. Sasaki's story, the more I felt a pang, as if a thing that had been nearby until now was drawing away.

I didn't know anything about Tohko.

I wanted to, but I didn't.

Not about her family.

Not about her childhood.

Nothing…

"Tohko resembles Yui in a lot of ways. The way she smiles is exactly like her. And the way she speaks and acts makes it seem that Yui is right there with you.

"That's probably why Amano loved Tohko so much. He was focused so entirely on his job before she was born that people joked that he got his mail at work, and yet he would practically run home when evening came and help Yui out. That was the only time his work got put on hold. It was like he couldn't stand to be away from Yui, he was so worried about her. He was fidgety even when he was at work, and I think everyone used to tease him."

"… How is Tohko's family now?" I asked in a low voice. Mr. Sasaki shut his mouth abruptly and lowered his eyes sadly.

“They both passed away when Tohko was about eight years old. They were in a car and… there was an accident.”

I gasped slightly.

Why was Tohko living at Ryuto’s house?

I had always wondered.

And also why Tohko’s voice was very warm when she talked about her parents and yet occasionally it was mixed with some melancholy— Tohko’s parents had died a long time ago!

Mr. Sasaki didn’t go into any more detail than that. He closed his mouth, clasped his hands together on the table, bowed his head slightly, and sat in pained silence.

He, too, had lost an irreplaceable friend in that accident.

Once the heavy mood had drawn out for a bit, Mr. Sasaki sluggishly lifted his face.

Then he gazed at me, and in a voice filled with gravity, as if he needed to tell me this at least, he said, “Tohko was your earliest fan, Inoue.

“I doubt there was anybody who read your book who was waiting for Miu Inoue’s next novel as much as Tohko was. When I was still your agent, Tohko often nagged me about when the next book would be. Two years ago when I told her that Miu Inoue might never write again, Tohko looked like she was going to cry.”

I couldn’t say anything.

Each time I remembered how sad she had looked or how her voice had caught, it tore at my chest and my throat squeezed tight. My arm grew achingly hot where Tohko had grabbed it— The desire to see Tohko.

Colliding in my heart with the thought that I couldn’t see her…

“Club time, Konoha!”

Tohko pulling my hand and leading me out of the room despite my protests. I wrote snacks for Tohko every day in the soft light of the western sun.

Tohko had always been excited when I handed over the paper.

A gentle smile.

A cheerful voice.

I wanted to hear her voice, but it was growing distant. Her shape and her eyes were growing hazy, too.

“Are you sure you don’t feel like writing another book?”

I couldn’t manage a response to Mr. Sasaki’s question as he gazed at me. My lips stayed firmly shut.

Mr. Sasaki told me he would send me home in a taxi, so he asked me to wait in the lobby.

“I’ll take the train home.”

“So much has happened today, you must be exhausted. Let me get you a cab.”

Mr. Sasaki was right; even though I hadn’t exercised or anything, my limbs felt incredibly heavy and my temples ached. I thought I might get sick if I had to deal with the crowds on the train, so I accepted his offer.

“Thank you.”

“I’ll be right back, so have a seat on the sofa while you wait.”

With that, he went back to his colleagues.

Mr. Sasaki must have been busy as a host today, too. I felt awful for monopolizing him despite that.

I went up the escalator to the first floor, then handed in the ticket for my coat and schoolbag at the front desk. I put my coat on, then sat down on a sofa in the lobby, holding my bag in my arms. Sitting down made my body feel like it had grown even heavier.

It was dinnertime and I still wasn’t home, so I was sure my mother was worried.

Kotobuki, too…

Just as I was opening my cell phone, I could see a slender woman in a vivid

royal-blue dress walking toward me.

She made my heart pound hard. Keeping my grip on my bag, I gulped.

Just like when she'd stood at the microphone, the woman gave off a frigid, regal air that seemed to reject all else.

I stared at her, my entire body tense, my eyes never straying.

She picked up an expensive-looking fur coat at the front desk and slipped it on in an elegant motion, then started moving toward the revolving doors at the main entrance.

My throat was bone-dry. I couldn't even blink, and my eyes hurt.

Just then, she turned around.

Her eyes, empty of emotion, colder than absolute zero, met mine.

In that instant, I felt as if her look had become a crystal arrow that pierced my heart.

We stared at each other, standing at a distance.

Unable to breathe, unable to look away, I wonder how long we stayed like that.

Breaking under the tension, I stood up and crept over to her, utterly her inferior.

"You're Kanako Sakurai, right? Um, my name is Konoha Inoue. I go to Seijoh Academy. I'm in a club with Tohko. We met once outside your house."

It was impossible to believe that this woman was someone's mother.

Her limbs, the line of her neck, her hips, they were all surprisingly slender and her skin was white and smooth as wax. I wondered how old she was. Since she was Ryuto's mother, it wasn't out of the question for her to be in her late thirties or early forties, but she looked as if she had transcended mere age.

There was no sense whatsoever of warmth or vivacity in her glossy, chestnut-brown hair, which was styled in a short cut, or in the sharp line of her nose, or in the red blush of her lips; she was incredibly cold, her features graceful, and almost oppressively beautiful.

She looked at my face in silence.

“I’m sorry for being there unannounced last time. And, um… I had no idea Ryuto’s mother was the author Kanako Sakurai.”

“Are you writing something at the moment?”

The sudden question in her clear, cold voice left me with nothing to say.

Without any expression on her face, she went on.

“You’re Miu Inoue, aren’t you?”

My cheeks burned like fire.

She knew who I was!

When I thought about it, though, I realized that if Tohko and Ryuto both knew, there was no way Kanako didn’t. Plus she’d been a judge, and my real name and address and a brief history had been written on my submission.

“… I stopped writing novels. I’m an ordinary high school student now,” I murmured as I tried desperately to stop my voice from shaking. The searing fire in my chest was humiliation and anger. Was she going to tell me to write like Tohko and Ryuto had?

But Kanako Sakurai, the author, pronounced in a cold, disinterested voice, “It’s better that way. You could never be an author.”

Blood rushed into my head.

“There is some question as to whether this author will be capable of producing another piece.”

My whole body was assaulted by a burning shame. While I struggled to take a breath, her words went on indifferently, as if she were looking down from heaven.

“I know someone who writes novels very similar to yours. Their spirit was weak. They never could have been an author.”

Standing stiffly, I couldn’t say anything in response.

I was utterly outmatched.

If she were a magnificent moon shining in the heavens, I was a cowardly cricket hiding in the shadows of the grass.

“Inoue.”

Mr. Sasaki ran up to us, looking frantic.

Kanako gave Mr. Sasaki a slight nod, then turned her back on me without a word. With an alluring rustle of the hem of her royal-blue dress, she disappeared through the revolving door.

“Did Kanako say anything to you, Inoue?” Mr. Sasaki asked me worriedly as I quailed, looking miserable.

“… She said… I could never be an author.”

“I believe being an author is a lonely line of work that asks you to pass through a narrow gate quite alone.”

Her majestic voice had shot through me, and it resurfaced in my mind along with the words she had just hurled at me. I was filled with bitter thoughts.

Mr. Sasaki frowned.

“Kanako is extraordinarily exacting about the work she does and she can be easily misunderstood. So, uh… I hope you won’t let her get under your skin.”

“… I’m not.”

As soon as I’d said it, my brain burned. He was right; there was no reason to worry about it. Because I wasn’t going to be an author.

So then why had it shocked me this badly? Why did I ache like my chest had been hollowed out?

Mr. Sasaki rested a hand on my shoulder consolingly.

“I’m sorry I took so long. Let’s go.”

“Amano debuted Kanako, you know. She’d been best friends with Tohko’s mother, Yui, ever since they were in middle school.”

Mr. Sasaki spoke sporadically in the taxi.

“Have you ever read one of her books, Inoue?”

"… No."

"If you read one all the way through, you'll feel a shock, as if the world you've lived in your whole life has been turned on end. Her pen drags out the taboos and the fear lying beneath the surface of a peaceful, everyday life without reservation and depicts them almost clinically. There are people who criticize her work as confessional novels typical of a female author and say that they simply explore her lived experiences, but they're wrong. Kanako Sakurai is a true author."

Within his calm tone was an unshakable admiration.

The things Kanako had told me still ached deep in my chest.

So that was what her novels were like…

Unhesitating, clinical.

The exact opposite of the way I felt lost about everything—

"Since her descriptions are so realistic, there was a big stir that suggested Arisa, the protagonist of her book *The Immoral Passage*, was Kanako herself, but that was just something made up by the weeklies…"

"Alissa?"

A chill shot through my chest and the question slipped out of me. The heroine of *Strait Is the Gate* was named Alissa, too. And the title *The Immoral Passage* evoked *Strait Is the Gate.*

"Did the character resemble Kanako?"

Mr. Sasaki started, and he became suddenly evasive.

"Well… of course any character will have some things in common with the author. But she's hardly an exact duplicate. And of course not all of the things she wrote in that book are true. A book is never more than fiction after all, unlike a newspaper article…," he murmured hesitantly, then changed the subject.

"Konoha, where have you been? Why didn't you call?"

When I reached home, my mother came out to the front door looking worried.

"I'm sorry, Mom. I decided to go to the movies with a friend. My phone's

battery died and I couldn't call. I looked for a pay phone, but I didn't see one…"

"You should have borrowed your friend's phone, then."

"They don't believe in cell phones."

Fighting back the throbbing pain that cut through my chest, I added to my lies.

I wonder what kind of face my mom would make if I told her that I'd been with Mr. Sasaki.

If I told her that he'd made me that offer—"*Won't you write again?*"

Would it end with her saying I was better off not writing? Or would she reply that I should do what I wanted?

Either way, my mother would probably suffer like she had two years ago.

If I weren't Miu Inoue—if I hadn't written a novel—my mom and dad could have lived in peace as the parents of ordinary high school student Konoha Inoue.

"What about dinner, Konoha?"

"Thanks. I'll have some. I'm gonna go change first."

I climbed the stairs and headed to my room. The heater hadn't been turned on, so the room was freezing cold.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and listened to Kotobuki's voice mail.

"Um… it's me. Did something happen?"

And to the next two.

"I didn't see you in the book club room, either. Where are you? You can just text me, but let me know."

Kotobuki's voice was hoarse with uncertainty.

Her last message was a text.

I'm going home now.

Still waiting to hear from you.

As I gazed at the words on the screen, my heart was crushed and my throat and eyes burned. The time stamp on the text was when the library closed, an

hour later. Had she waited for me all that time?

Just as I was about to call Kotobuki's number, a solemn ring tone started playing all of a sudden and I nearly dropped the phone.

A call!

Kotobuki?

No, Kotobuki's ring tone was the theme song from *Beauty and the Beast*, so it couldn't be her. It was someone else.

I checked the caller and a shudder prickled the back of my neck.

Ryuto!

My cold, trembling fingers pressed the talk button and I put the phone to my ear.

I held my breath until I heard a low voice accompanied by a muffled laugh.

"Good to be home, huh, Konoha?"

A chill went through me, as if I'd been slashed by a pointed chunk of ice.

How did he know I was home?!

Thinking about it calmly, I realized Mr. Sasaki could have called Ryuto after I'd left, or Ryuto could have checked with him.

But just then I had the feeling that Ryuto was somewhere nearby keeping an eye on my movements, and even the line of darkness I could see between the curtains made me shudder.

"Did you enjoy the party?"

"How could I enjoy that? Getting stranded somewhere like that in my school uniform?"

"It's good you stood out, though. What exactly are you afraid of? At a party like that, you shoulda been soakin' up more accolades than anyone, shoulda gotten more jealous looks than anyone, and been able to shine. And yet you snuck around and then ran off. Do you ever get sick of yourself?"

"What are you getting at?"

Was he trying to make me mad? Or was he just mocking me?

“The reason you’re afraid of workin’ as an author is ’cos you’re runnin’ away from it. You oughta take a stand and face it boldly. Your talent would do the rest. It could push you to the very top. To such glorious heights that nobody’s criticism and no stupid sentimentality would reach you. Where you could look down on the common people from above—if you think about it, a life like that sounds pretty good, right?”

“I don’t want anything like that. Not the lonely life of going through the narrow gate alone—”

My chest was thrumming with anger and my head was so hot it ached. I spoke in a strong tone.

“That’s what your mom called it. She said that’s what it’s like to be an author. That you can’t survive by being spoiled with reliance on your family and friends. I prefer to be with my family and friends! So I don’t care if I never become an author. Your own mother told me to my face that I’d never be able to be one!”

“… And that made you give up?”

“I don’t have any reason to keep going, do I? What are you trying to accomplish, making Takeda give me *Strait Is the Gate* and everything? What do you want to make me do? What’s the meaning behind that book?!”

“You don’t get it?” Ryuto muttered darkly. “Why don’t you think about it? If Juliette and Jerome got married, how would it have turned out?”

“If Juliette and Jerome…?”

Jerome was the protagonist who narrated the story, and Juliette was Alissa’s little sister, who had a crush on Jerome.

Alissa had wanted Jerome and Juliette to get married, but Juliette stepped aside without ever telling Jerome her feelings.

In the book, Jerome sought Alissa so intensely that he loved only her. He didn’t have a shred of feeling for Juliette.

If Juliette had been married to Jerome like that?

“Do you think maybe Juliette could have been happy? Even though Jerome had

given his heart to Alissa?”

“What does that have to do with me?”

“Don’t you think Jerome is kinda like you? All wishy-washy? Sensitive and yet so stupid he never even noticed that Juliette liked him. Didn’t have the guts to go after Alissa. Nothin’ but excuses.”

“Urk—”

“That’s why Alissa got snatched away by God. She disappears from Jerome’s life and he never gets to see her again. If you keep up like this, you’ll be the same way, Konoha.”

In the cold, unheated room, with my phone pressed to my ear listening to what Ryuto was saying, the air weighed heavily on my body. My fingers tingled painfully with cold as they gripped the phone.

“Are you talking about Tohko? Are you doing these things for Tohko, Ryuto? Aren’t you the one who likes her?”

There was a brief silence on the speaker.

He finally answered in a quiet voice.

“You’re right… I like her a lot.”

My heart wrenched painfully. So it was true!

“Tohko is different from other girls… she’s special. Her mom was the first woman I ever loved.”

Tohko’s… mother?

I was caught off guard by this unexpected confession, but Ryuto’s voice went on, tinged with melancholy.

“I wanted her ever since I was little. I’d think how amazing it’d be if we could be together forever. But… she couldn’t be happy.

“She got betrayed in a way that could never be taken back, by someone she trusted. She fell into a black, lonely darkness… and it ate away at her heart.”

His voice was transforming into something more and more pained.

The words Ryuto had uttered at the planetarium.

“I wanna be the kind of man who can protect the girl he’s into to the very end.”

Was the person he’d wanted to protect Tohko’s mother, Yui?

But Yui had died with her husband, Fumiharu, in a car accident.

So was he trying to protect her daughter, Tohko, in her place?

“Everybody is just a replacement for her.”

Takeda had told me there was “someone special” that Ryuto couldn’t tell how he felt.

Was Tohko a “replacement” in Ryuto’s eyes, too?

Ryuto’s voice grew strong again.

“Alissa told Jerome that if he had a daughter, she wanted him to name her Alissa after her. But do you know what happened to that little girl—to Juliette’s daughter, Alissa?”

His voice was so low it made me shudder, sweeping into my ear with a chill breath.

“Her existence was erased.”

Up until now, Ryu has called Tohko “cousin Tohko,” but as soon as he started elementary school, he started to call her just Tohko and that infuriates her.

Ryu says, “Saying cousin Tohko is what babies do. It’s stupid.”

“You’re younger than me, Ryu, and you’re my little brother. You don’t get to decide! I’m not gonna call you Ryu anymore, either, then! I’ll just call you Ryuto, like I don’t even care about you! I’m not gonna call you any nicknames anymore!”

Tohko must have believed that Ryu would cry at that and start saying, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry! I’ll call you cousin Tohko. Please call me Ryu.” But Ryu was blasé about it, so she got even more upset. She looked pretty frustrated.

Kana?

Doesn't hearing about the kids arguing over names remind you of middle school when we became friends?

When I first saw you reading a book in the library, you were so pretty and mature and majestic that I thought you were in one of the higher grades. I was captivated.

When I found out you were a first-year like me, I was shocked and became even more curious about you.

Since we were in different classes, I was only watching you from afar, but I was always fascinated. Gym was the only time our classes mixed, so of course I looked forward to it. Seeing it on the schedule the day before thrilled me. I was terrible at exercising and I hated gym class the whole time I was in elementary school. The fact that I could look at you and how pretty you were was enough to make me happy.

And so when I got to be in the same class as you in second year, I was so overjoyed I thought my head would explode.

I'll be friends with Kana! I want to get to know her! I want to get closer to her!

Cherishing those ambitions, I would practice talking to you over and over at home, dreaming breathlessly of the day I would do it for real.

"Sakurai? You borrowed Ogai Mori's *Dancing Girl* from the library before, right? I've been thinking of reading that, too. How was it?"

Actually, I'd already read and reread *Dancing Girl* and wept at Elise's sad fate. It had twisted my heart.

I was hoping that you would say the book I loved was interesting, but your answer was curt.

"It was boring."

"What?"

"Elise got on my nerves."

Then you left the classroom. So our very first conversation that should have been so memorable was left at that.

I kept employing the tactic of making casual conversation about the books you checked out of the library, but…

"Sakurai? What did you think of Schau Penn's *The World's Will and Portrait*?"

"It's *The World as Will and Representation* by Arthur Schopenhauer. It was fascinating, but I think you'd find it boring, Satomura."

It didn't work out too well in the end.

I loved books and wrote some stories in secret and considered myself a book girl, and yet the books you read were sometimes gibberish to me.

Even so, I was tenacious. That's probably why it happened.

Gradually, you started to talk to me, Kana.

You were aloof and mature and you didn't smile at me very often, but when my council meetings ran late, you would wait for me in the classroom, reading a book. That made me *so* happy!

You were also the first person to read something I'd written.

You wouldn't tell me it was interesting, but… "Is there more?" you asked, and I was as thrilled as if I'd gotten a piece of the most exquisite chocolate. I was so excited.

"If I wrote more, would you read it?"

"… All right."

You telling me that so bluntly has always driven me to write books.

Even after we got more familiar and started to huddle at my desk during lunch to eat our boxed lunches and started going home together after school, we still called each other Sakurai and Satomura, remember?

I'd always yearned to call you by your first name, so one day I burst out with "Kana—" and you stiffened for about three seconds; then you made a disgusted face and said, "You're making my skin crawl. Please don't do that."

I was devastated, but I knew I couldn't back down now, so I scraped together my courage and kept on calling you—"Kana! Kana!"

Eventually you caved and stopped saying anything about it.

The first time you said Yui and called me by my first name was at our graduation ceremony from middle school.

I'll never forget it as long as I live, Kana.

The high school you wanted to go to was too hard for me, but I wanted to stay with you so I studied really hard. Ultimately I didn't get in. It hurt so much that we were going on to different high schools and it felt like my heart was being ripped apart, so I said, "You're going to forget about me once you start high school. I know it. I care about you so much, but you don't care at all!" like a little kid, tears rolling down my face, and you said my name, "Yui…," with a serious look on your face.

"I won't forget you, Yui. We may be going to different schools, but we can see each other after school and on our days off. That way I'll be able to read the rest of your book."

The way the white snowflakes danced around us that day, like petals on the breeze.

How perfectly blue the sky was, arching above the branches loaded with snow.

How intent your eyes were, Kana, as they stared at me.

And the freshness of the breeze stroking my cheek and how cool and nice your fingers felt when you wiped away my tears. And how happy I was and how I thought I might melt away with the snow.

I remember it, over and over.

Kana.

I want to talk to you more, like we did then.

Are you still busy with work?

Chapter 4—An Author's Lies

The next day.

When we saw each other in class, Kotobuki looked troubled and hung her head.

"M… morning."

"Sorry about yesterday."

"No… it's okay. You did call…"

Last night, after a lot of thought, I called Kotobuki.

"Sorry it's so late. I thought about texting, but…"

I told her a lie, that I'd gotten an urgent call from my family and I'd had to rush home. If Kotobuki found out that Ryuto was involved, I knew it would worry her. It was better not to tell her.

"I heard a relative was really, really sick and so… I was just so upset… I'm really sorry. Yeah, everything's okay… They pulled through. Yeah… uh-huh… thanks. I'm sorry again…"

Kotobuki hadn't gotten mad; actually, she'd been concerned about me.

My chest felt like it was being crushed by guilt, but I didn't want to hurt Kotobuki more than I already had.

"Um, I have to go home with my friends today… We're, uh… going to go buy chocolate together," Kotobuki murmured apologetically.

"Oh, right, it's Valentine's Day tomorrow."

When I said that, she turned bright red.

“E-everyone’s got their real chocolate already. Mine’s all ready, too. It’s just that the department stores give out samples of the chocolate the day before Valentine’s Day, so you can eat a bunch of high-end chocolate…”

“Really?”

“I don’t necessarily want to eat it. I’m just going along. Maybe I shouldn’t?”

Kotobuki stole a glance at my face.

My chest ached with the sharp pain of telling lies and of her going to so much trouble for me, but I smiled awkwardly.

“No, go ahead. It’s the one time you can eat all the expensive chocolate you want.”

“… O-okay.”

She nodded, still looking nervous, then grabbed the sleeve of my uniform tightly.

“Oh! But since it’s Valentine’s Day tomorrow, keep your schedule open after school, okay?”

“I will.”

“A-and, um…”

Kotobuki turned even redder.

“Would you… come to my house tomorrow?”

“Huh?”

“It—it—it—it—it’s not because Mori said we should! I don’t have any weird plans—I mean, anyway, I wanted you to have some warm chocolate—th-that’s all! Don’t get the wrong idea or anything.”

She explained herself rapidly, still holding on to my sleeve.

A smile slipped out of me despite myself.

“Sure, okay.”

Kotobuki’s eyes went wide.

“After school tomorrow, then. I can’t wait to try the chocolate.”

She must have been embarrassed because she dipped her head and murmured, "… I'll do my best," in a quietly happy voice.

Her friends had gotten to school by then, so Kotobuki went over to them.

My heart felt just a little bit lighter.

I thought fondly of the warm glow of a life where I didn't get hurt and I didn't hurt anyone else.

I wanted to cherish it. I didn't want to lose it. I was living in this spot where Kotobuki was.

But a dark shadow fell immediately back over my heart.

There was still time before homeroom started…

I left the classroom and went to the library.

The book that Mr. Sasaki had told me about yesterday, the book Kanako Sakurai had written, had been nagging at me.

That the protagonist's name was Arisa.

That he said the author had served as the model for the character.

Could the scenario that Ryuto had told me about, where Juliette is married to Jerome, be the story of the novel Kanako wrote?

A sign was hung on the library door reading CLOSED.

I wondered if the librarian was there.

I turned the doorknob and the door opened easily.

The curtains in the deserted room were thrown open and the morning light streamed in blindingly. A lone girl wearing a school uniform was sitting at a desk in the reading room.

Takeda turned her entire chair around toward me and smiled guilelessly at me.

"Good morning, Konoha. Did you come looking for this book?"

I saw that the hardcover book in her outstretched hand was titled *The Immoral Passage*, and I felt as if I'd toppled from the brilliance of the ordinary to the utter darkness of the extraordinary.

“Did Ryuto tell you I would come?”

Still grinning as if to say, “Wouldn’t you like to know?” Takeda handed me the dark blue book.

“The librarian is out today. Why not stay here and read?”

I descended the rusty spiral staircase with *clang-clang-clanging* steps.

We came to a gray door and Takeda opened it.

“Go ahead.”

I had been to this room before. It had a sweet smell to it, just like then. The smell of old books with yellowing pages. It was darker than the last time and so cold it made my bones creak.

The underground storage room that even the library workers got creeped out by and refused to enter was Takeda’s secret room.

There were several bookcases in it, and in the handful of empty spots were old school desks and chairs. The walls and even the floor in the cramped “book graveyard” were packed with old books.

Takeda turned on a lamp on one of the desks. When she did, the room became slightly brighter.

“Here are some provisions from me.”

With that, she set an orange water bottle and a disposable hand warmer on the desk.

“There’s peach oolong tea in the bottle. Okay, I’m going to go to class now. Enjoy yourself.”

“… Thanks for the supplies.”

“Heh-heh-heh. Nooo problem.”

Takeda inclined her head childishly and made a show of bashfulness; then she shut the door and left.

The *clang-clang-clang* of her steps grew distant.

Why had I come down here and not gone back to class? I would make Kotobuki

worry again.

I didn't understand it myself. But when I got this book from Takeda, I was seized by some dark, indescribable thing.

It resembled the sensation I'd had when I first looked up at Kanako Sakurai, the author, onstage.

That despite my fear, I couldn't help staring at the woman shrouded in a coldly noble air who seemed to reject everything.

That strange sensation that made my spine tremble and my head feel numb— I sat in the creaky chair, ripped open the packaging on the disposable hand warmer that Takeda had given me, and set it in my lap.

I opened the lid of the orange water bottle and poured the warm peach-scented tea into the cap. Once I had drunk that and warmed myself up, I opened the book and began to read.

The first few lines—

That alone overwhelmed me with the clarity the writing exuded.

The words polished like crystals, without the slightest waste, had been exactingly selected and logically organized.

There was no superfluous ornamentation. And yet the sentences she'd assembled were beautifully transparent, beyond compare, and the situations and emotions communicated themselves realistically, as if they were happening right in front of me.

As I progressed through the story, my throat grew sticky and dry, and the dimness and the cold of the room stopped bothering me. More oppressive instead was the heavy darkness and the frigidity that bubbled up in my mind.

The story was told with words of beautiful clarity. It was an account of the love and hatred between one woman and a married couple.

The narrator was an author named Arisa. A talented editor with the pet name of Haru appears. His wife is named Yuiko—a book girl who dreamed of becoming an author.

Arisa and Yuiko were friends who belonged to a literary society in college. The

two are depicted as polar opposites: the aloof Arisa who has trouble interacting with people and the adorable Yuiko who is kind to everyone.

Through the offices of an upperclassman, Yuiko submits her manuscript to Haru, who's an alumni of the club.

In the end, Yuiko and Haru become lovers and get married. But the thing that attracted Haru as an editor was not the manuscript Yuiko submitted, but rather a short essay Arisa wrote for the club magazine.

Without telling Yuiko, Haru meets with Arisa and convinces her to write a novel.

"You are someone who should write. Have you ever read Strait Is the Gate*? You remind me of the character Alissa who pursues celestial love. The way you stubbornly go after the things you believe in and nothing else—But that means you might be able to pass through the narrow gate someday and reach 'supremacy.' "*

Haru praises the novel she writes based on her own experiences.

"I want you to let me handle this novel! You could be an author. No, you've already discovered the narrow gate that allows only a handful to see it! All that's left is to pass through it."

Haru and Yuiko marry, and Arisa's novel is published and becomes widely discussed.

Yuiko takes Haru and Arisa to task over it.

"Why didn't you tell me that Arisa wrote a novel? What were you two doing when I wasn't around?"

Arisa tells Yuiko, *"Haru and I are Alissa and Jerome from* Strait Is the Gate. *So we could never be wed. Alissa doesn't want that. And you're a Juliette who was able to wed Jerome, Yuiko."*

Haru and Arisa were bound by the powerful ties of an author and her editor. None of the sexual desire between a man and a woman existed between them. The two of them had no need for something so foolish, so uncertain, so problematic.

Each of them simply hoped to be an indispensable partner in order to reach the ideal called God—the supreme novel.

Arisa casually sleeps with passing men and dangerous younger boys.

But Haru is the only one she didn't think of as an object for that sort of thing.

The very act of having such an idea would have been profanity against Haru and herself. Their relationship was something purer and more certain than that.

Arisa was Kanako.

Haru was Fumiharu.

Yuiko was Yui. Even without knowing the three of them that well, that much was obvious when I read the book.

Their background and situations overlapped too much.

It wouldn't be unreasonable for someone reading this story to suppose that Kanako had written about the three of them exactly the way they were.

Just how much of it was true and where did the lies begin? Or was everything written here a creation of the author Kanako Sakurai? I couldn't be sure.

I was simply pulled along by the intelligent writing and the unpredictable progression of the story.

I continued to turn the pages, warming my fingers on the hand warmer when they grew numb.

Once Yuiko has become Haru's wife, she suspects that he and Arisa are having an affair, and the flames of jealousy smolder in her heart.

Haru is late getting home due to his editing work and often spends the night elsewhere, but all Yuiko can imagine is that it's an excuse for secret meetings with Arisa and it torments her. She would often go to Haru's office to check on him under the pretense of bringing him a change of clothes.

"I want children." Yuiko begins to fixate on this.

If they had children, she would be able to pull Haru back to her side.

She would manage to keep Arisa from stealing him.

Yuiko seduces Haru without any concern for how it makes her look, and they couple like animals in the apartment Arisa uses as an office.

Arisa watches the scene coldly from the next room.

In the end, Yuiko becomes pregnant and gives birth to a baby girl.

Her name is Toco.

I stopped flipping through the pages and froze.

Toco?

This was about Tohko!

If the models for Haru and Yuiko were Tohko's parents, then it wouldn't be so strange if their daughter, Tohko, made an appearance, too.

But it gave me a weird feeling to see the name of someone I was close to in the novel. And if the events overlapped to this extent…

Haru is over the moon about his daughter's birth, and he starts to wrap up his work early and go home often in order to see her.

Arisa feels as if she's been betrayed by Haru.

Wasn't Haru a kindred spirit? Weren't they partners, aiming for supremacy together? Had Haru been sullied by the vulgar world and corrupted?

Alissa was supposed to be the only one for Jerome, whether or not he was married to Juliette!

Yuiko was flaunting her happiness to Arisa, who was faltering.

How adorable Toco is, how much Haru loves his daughter, how he cherishes her and looks after her, never taking his eyes from her for a moment. How he thinks of her as a treasure.

How fulfilled and happy the family is.

She told Arisa at every opportunity, she wrote Arisa letters, she sent her photos, she invited her to the house, she showed her how adorable Toco was and how madly in love with her Haru was.

Yuiko and Arisa's positions were flipped, and Arisa's irritation grew.

If only Toco had never come.

Arisa turned her murderous rage on the innocent baby who had planted herself in front of the shining ideal she and Haru had pursued.

She hated Toco.

If only she would disappear!

One day, no longer able to control the dark impulse, Arisa wraps her hands around Toco's throat when Yuiko is out of the house.

Toco thrashes her little limbs and struggles, fighting back desperately, but Arisa ignores it, putting one hand over Toco's mouth and continuing to squeeze her weak, slender neck with the other. Finally Toco stops crying and doesn't move anymore. She isn't breathing.

Arisa puts her ear over Toco's heart to make sure there's no heartbeat; then she goes home with a feeling of dark glee.

This would snap Haru out of it.

This would cast Yuiko into the depths of despair.

But Yuiko's behavior doesn't change at all, even after that.

She talks to Arisa about Toco and flaunts her happiness even more than before.

Had Toco not died? Had she botched the job?

Seeing Yuiko continue to talk contentedly about Toco threatened to rip her heart open. She couldn't bear it!

Her hatred fostered madness and Arisa fed Yuiko poison to try and kill her.

The poison was mixed into Yuiko's morning soup and Haru accidentally ate some, too. The two then went out for a drive and were killed in a car accident.

After that, their daughter, Toco, was orphaned.

It was a doll, and in a drawer was the corpse of the girl Arisa had killed.

The child Toco had already departed this life.

For a little while, I couldn't take my eyes from the last page.

It was a shock, as if the world as it currently existed had been turned utterly on end— That was how Mr. Sasaki had described the feeling of finishing Kanako Sakurai's book.

You were drawn too far in and were unable to return to the real world from the world of the novel.

You even got the feeling that your own life had ended.

But what made my body feel even colder was that Arisa had murdered Toco in the story.

"Do you know what happened to… Juliette's daughter, Alissa?"

Ryuto's words echoed in my mind and a shudder went through my spine.

"Her existence was erased."

Just as he'd said, Kanako Sakurai had erased the existence of Tohko Amano. By strangling the baby Toco in the book she'd written— Everything written here was fiction.

Tohko was still alive. She still existed.

But was Kanako capable of so cruelly murdering, even inside a novel, a living person—in fact, the girl who was her friend's daughter and whom she shared her life with? Someone she let board in her house?

That wasn't all.

Killing the couple who were her friends by poisoning them—

Haru and Yuiko had died in a car accident. The poison had coursed through Haru's body while he drove, and he failed to turn the steering wheel, so they crashed into a guardrail and tumbled off a cliff, inside their car.

Mr. Sasaki had told me that Tohko's parents had died in a car crash, too. He had been evasive about it at the time.

If what was written in the novel were true—

If Kanako was the one who had fed the Amanos poison and arranged it so that they had an accident— No, that couldn't have happened! It was crazy to confess that you'd killed someone in a novel. First off, if it was true, the police would

never leave you alone.

“I’ve got to calm down,” I muttered in the book graveyard, which was lit dimly by only the table lamp.

I couldn’t tell what was fantasy and what was reality.

“Get a grip. Don’t let it turn you around.”

Something was certain—Tohko was alive in this world right now. Kanako Sakurai had written a novel that could be seen as using herself, the Amanos, and their daughter as inspiration. The couple and their daughter were killed in the book. The Amanos had actually died in a car crash. Their daughter, Tohko, was boarding at the Sakurai house.

The more I thought about it, the creepier this woman Kanako Sakurai seemed. Along with the fact that she had written a novel that seemed to confess she'd committed murder and she was letting the girl she'd killed in the book stay at her house.

Why had she written a novel like that?

Had Tohko read this?

If so, how had she felt?

If someone wrote a novel where they killed me and I read it, I would probably feel like my heart were being shredded with knives, like I'd been tossed into a dark sea and was sinking.

I would be so shocked by it, I would probably stop trusting people. And then to have to live under the same roof with the person who'd written something like that—that would probably be a terror like being swallowed up in utter darkness.

Maybe this person really does hate me so much that they want to kill me. Maybe they really will kill me someday. I would get seized by that kind of paranoia, and since I would never have space to let my emotions relax, I might start to go crazy.

How had it been for Tohko?

Mr. Sasaki told me that Tohko had been only eight years old when her parents died.

Had she been at the Sakurai house ever since?

When I'd run into Kanako outside her house that one time, Tohko had spoken to her in a friendly way and told her with a bright smile that she was only seeing me off.

I couldn't detect a hint of uncertainty or fear toward Kanako from Tohko's behavior that day.

But—

I recalled how Kanako had stared hard at me for a moment, then slid her eyes away and passed us by.

Kanako hadn't spoken a word to Tohko that day. She hadn't even looked her in the face; *she'd acted as if Tohko Amano didn't even exist.*

All the hair on my body stood on end.

If that was how every day was for Tohko—

I felt oppressed by the cold darkness of the underground room, and I closed the book and left the place behind.

When I climbed the spiral staircase and opened the heavy door, there was no one in the reading room.

I looked at the clock on the wall. Third period was almost over.

I'd been down there for three hours…

I had to get back to class. Kotobuki would be worried about me.

Just then, my cell phone vibrated in my pocket.

As if he'd been watching for the hour when I would finish reading the book.

As if everything was going according to his script—

I held my breath and put the phone to my ear.

"Hello?"

"What did you think of Kanako's novel?"

A dark voice that seemed to echo up from the depths of the earth came through the earpiece and crept into my ear.

I gripped the phone with a sweaty hand and said in a harsh voice, "… When you said Jerome married Juliette, you meant Tohko's parents, didn't you? But wasn't that the story in the book? Mr. Sasaki told me that Tohko's parents were very close."

"Is that what you're gonna tell yourself so you can run away again? That nothin' written in there is real? It's just an author lyin'?"

Ryuto's irritation came through and dug at my chest.

"Have you ever imagined how it feels to be treated like you don't exist? You're right there, but you get treated like you're not. You're denied everything—every

day your heart gets carved up and you experience disappointment again and again, but you have to smile anyway. Do you know how that feels?”

His voice was getting louder. Ryuto shouted as though he were hurling his raw emotions through the phone.

“You gave someone like that a dream! That if you wrote, maybe something would change! That maybe you had the power to change the future!”

“Why me? There are plenty of other authors! Why do I have to write?!”

My emotions were wavering, keyed up like a wave shattering on a cliff face.

“You should learn who Tohko Amano is, Konoha.”

Ryuto’s words cut forcefully into my chest and I gasped.

“Why Tohko tried to make you write a novel. Why it had to be you. You gotta wake up already and see how Tohko feels. See the truth.”

The call cut off and I was left standing there.

“You should learn who Tohko Amano is…”

I’d thought I understood Tohko pretty well before.

But that was only Tohko at school; I didn’t have a clue about Tohko anywhere else.

Not even that Tohko’s family was dead.

The core of my brain grew searingly hot, and I couldn’t tell if the scream rising up in my throat with that intense pain was because of pain or regret.

But I knew that I had to act somehow.

Why did Tohko want me to write?

What had she been thinking, spending two years at my side?

I had to find out about Tohko, about the Amanos, and about that author with the cold eyes that commanded the heavens—Kanako Sakurai.

Even if it *was* a development that was in line with the script that someone had written for me.

When I got back to the classroom, Kotobuki ran up to me.

“Inoue! Where have you been?”

Her face was holding up against tears, her forehead tight and her mouth pulled into a frown.

“I was looking for something at the library.”

“You were *looking for something*?!”

She was probably shocked that I would skip class for a reason like that. Her voice was thick and her eyes widened.

“And it looks like it’s going to take a lot of time, so I thought I’d leave early today.”

“What are you looking for?”

“I’m sorry, I can’t talk about it yet.”

Her mouth bent into a frown again, and she looked at me worriedly, to which I declared, “I’ll definitely be at school tomorrow, and I’ll leave my afternoon free, too, so don’t worry,” in as cheerful a tone as I could.

“I… promise.”

“Okay.”

When I went back to my seat and packed my schoolbooks up, Akutagawa came over.

“Are you going home?”

“Something urgent came up.”

“You still don’t need my help, Inoue?” Akutagawa asked with an earnest look.

Akutagawa was worrying about me, too…

My chest was punctured by his forthright gaze.

“Thanks. When I absolutely need you, I’ll ask.”

“Just let me know anytime.”

“I will.”

I forced a smile, picked up my coat and bag, and left the classroom.

Then my feet carried me to the school's music hall.

It had been built by alumni of the orchestra. On the top floor was the workroom of Maki, the girl we called Princess.

The third-years were on voluntary attendance, but Maki had been recommended to a school, so she didn't have to take exams. She might have come to draw.

She was the school director's granddaughter and the heir to the Himekura Group, so Maki was known as a font of information. She would always demand "compensation" as collateral, but I was in a place right now where I would do anything, including modeling. I wondered if I could get Maki to investigate the accident that had killed Tohko's parents.

But it wasn't Maki in the workroom; it was her personal assistant, Takamizawa.

"I apologize, when you've come all this way. It seems that Miss Maki wasn't feeling well and so she returned home early."

"I see…"

"If you have a message, I can see that she gets it."

"No, it's fine. I hope she feels better."

How could Maki have gotten sick? Even she could catch a cold or get an upset stomach?

I'd been relying on her, but oh well. I had no choice but to try investigating the incident myself as best I could.

Kana, Tohko snuck Gide's *Strait Is the Gate* out of Fumiharu's bookcase and ate it.

It was an old book, so it gave Tohko a stomachache. Fumiharu had kept it with him and treasured it ever since he was a student and had pored over it again and again.

She was sobbing in bed and Fumiharu reminded her in a calm voice, "You can't eat Daddy's books without asking. Plus, old books are just like food that's past its expiration date. It's okay to read them, but if you eat them, they'll give

you a stomachache. I've told you that."

Tohko blubbered, "I'm sorry, Daddy. I won't do it again." Then she pleaded, "But you were reading it with such a nice look on your face that made my heart squeeeeze tight, and I wanted to see what it tasted like."

Fumiharu's eyes softened, and as a smile came over his face, he asked, "And did *Strait Is the Gate* taste good?"

Hiccuping, Tohko answered, "I couldn't really tell. It was like I was zoning out and munching on clear bean thread noodles instead of just slurping them up. I chewed and chewed, but there wasn't any taste. The noodles ran away from me. Daddy, why didn't Alissa marry Jerome? She loved him, didn't she? So then why did she go to God all by herself?"

"It might be a little hard for you to understand yet, Tohko. When you grow up and find someone you love, maybe then you'll understand how Alissa felt.

"You should try tasting *Strait Is the Gate* again when that happens. I promise it'll taste different."

"What will it taste like?"

"In his diary, the author Gide wrote that it was like nougat. That there are delicious almonds inside a sticky candy. He said that's what Alissa's letters were.

"But I think it tastes like consommé."

"Con… sommé?"

"That's right. A beautiful amber color—like the golden sparkle before night comes.

"Consommé could be considered simplistic, but a lot of different ingredients are mixed up and melted together in the clear liquid. It's very hard to name what each of them is. Even though it's transparent, you can't tell what ingredients are in it.

"I think that's a lot like the human heart. You can almost see it, but not quite.

"There are times when you have feelings that even you can't explain.

“Maybe that’s why I treasure it so much.”

The whole time Fumiharu was talking, he brushed aside the bangs that hung over Tohko’s forehead with his slender fingers.

With a smile in his eyes and a very kind, tender, but also slightly sad look…

I wonder what Fumiharu was thinking about while he told her about *Strait Is the Gate*.

I wonder whom he was thinking of…

When I left school, the place I headed to was the biggest library in the neighborhood.

They’d made it so you could read the back issues of newspapers and magazines on the library computers, so I searched them for articles on the Amanos’ accident, reading a string of articles.

The accident had been in March, nine years ago.

The Amanos had left their child at a friend’s house in order to attend a wedding and had headed toward the event in Chiba in their car.

Fumiharu had been driving. On the way there, he’d failed to turn the wheel, and the car had gone through a guardrail and tumbled over a cliff. Neither of them could be saved.

That was all that was written in the article.

The Immoral Passage was published half a year after the accident.

The author, Kanako Sakurai, seemed to be the model for the main character, who confesses to murder, and the shocking story made the news. It was widely reported in the weeklies that there had been models for the couple in the book, too, and that they had really died in a car crash, and that caused a stir.

There was a scandalous article from one of the weeklies that said the circumstances of the accident had been unnatural.

Apparently the police had taken notice of the commotion and begun an investigation.

But they'd found no evidence that Kanako Sakurai had poisoned the Amanos.

In the end, even as the article suggested that the book was a product of her imagination, it ended by bringing up the implication that it may have been more than that.

After that, Kanako Sakurai got fiercely bashed as a shameless author who would even use the deaths of her friends as material to sell books.

It wouldn't have been unusual for her to have a nervous breakdown. But she brushed off the attacks and was still writing even now.

I recalled the almost ominously beautiful and cold figure of Kanako standing onstage, and my throat squeezed tight and a shudder ran down my back.

Why had she written that novel?

The question rose again, accompanied by murky black emotions.

The Amanos were supposed to be her friends. So then why?

Imagining her state of mind was like holding your breath and peering into a limitless, absolute darkness.

It contained only a deeper darkness. Only an empty night opened up behind the depths of her cold eyes. The idea scared me so much that my body stiffened and a cold sweat coated me. The more I thought about her, the more it seemed I was being swallowed up in deep shadows, sinking away forever…

I was afraid of her.

By the time I shut down the library computer, my head throbbed and it was hard to breathe, as if I'd just done intense exercise.

I didn't understand Kanako's true feelings.

I could find out the circumstances with the newspaper and magazine articles. But I couldn't deduce what was in a person's heart. I didn't have enough material yet for that.

I stared at the computer until my eyes started to hurt, and the memory of the business card I'd thrown away came back to me.

I looked up the main phone number for the publisher on the Internet and

called it. When I told them a name and department, I was connected to Mr. Sasaki more easily than I'd expected.

On the other end of the thin cell phone, Mr. Sasaki sounded surprised.

When I told him I wanted to see him, he told me about a café three subway stops from where I was and told me he'd be waiting there.

"I see… so you read Kanako's book."

Mr. Sasaki sighed in the seat across from me an hour later.

In a dark voice I asked, "How much of what she wrote in *The Immoral Passage* is true?"

Mr. Sasaki looked troubled. He grunted several times, wiped away the sweat beading on his forehead, and shifted his gaze around restlessly; then he looked at me with a bitter face.

"To be honest, I don't really know, either. Kanako isn't the sort of person to reveal her feelings to others. She didn't say anything when the accident happened, either.

"Other than writing that lone book, she's preserved her silence."

Her cold, regal gaze that had transcended pain and suffering.

Had she looked down with those frigid, arrogant eyes on the people stirring things up against her, even when she'd been right in the middle of their attacks?

"As far as I saw, Kanako and Tohko's mother, Yui, were dear friends. Kanako often left Ryuto in Yui's care, and Yui seemed happy to look after him. Kanako focused so much on her work that Yui worried she had no time with Ryuto and that she would damage her health."

The words she'd directed to me in the lobby of the hotel had been cold enough to freeze, too.

"You could never be an author," she'd declared, as if brushing me aside.

A rasping voice escaped my dry lips.

"How could she write… like that… about the deaths of people she cared about?"

Mr. Sasaki murmured in response, his eyes pained, “It’s an author’s karma, I suppose…”

An author’s karma?

Something cold stabbed into my chest.

Had she, too, been absorbed by it, cast off every sentimental attachment, overcome ordinary life, and tossed aside even ethics, like Arisa in *The Immoral Passage*, seeking the path that led to the supremacy known as God?

Was he saying that because she was an author, she wrote about her friends’ deaths and murdered their daughter in her book?

It was so hard to fathom, so monstrous, it gave me a chill. At the same time, I was filled with such rage that it turned the insides of my eyes red.

Was the death of her friends nothing more than material for a novel to her?!

Was that what an author was?

That cold, selfish, arrogant, terrible human being—was that the sort of creature an author was? Did they not care when they hurt people with the stories they wrote?

If I were in Kanako’s position, I never could have written that! I wouldn’t have done it!

Because I’m not an author.

“You could never be an author.”

Her words resurfaced again, making my chest ache and my breathing grow strained.

“You told me that… Kanako debuted under Fumiharu…”

Mr. Sasaki nodded.

“That part’s just like in the novel. Kanako enrolled in the college literary circle that Yui belonged to and when he read their magazine, Amano was intrigued by Kanako’s essay and invited her to write a novel.”

Breathing became more and more difficult, and a chill was crawling up through me with a shudder. The same as in the novel? So that had really happened?

“Did Kanako keep it a secret from Yui? The fact that she was writing a novel and that Fumiharu was publishing it?”

“I don’t know about that…,” Mr. Sasaki murmured ambiguously. “But after the book was published, Yui was very worried about Kanako. About whether it was really a good thing that she’d been published.”

I was sure that was also exactly the same as in *The Immoral Passage*.

Kanako Sakurai’s debut work was released while she was still in college.

The story was sensational, the murder-suicide of a married couple described from the point of view of their sixteen-year-old daughter.

Unable to tolerate his habitually cheating wife, the husband strangles her in the kitchen of their home, then cuts off her head and arms. He then commits suicide by hanging himself at the side of her bloodstained corpse.

With a clear gaze, the young girl detachedly relates the tale of madness between a man and woman.

That event was something that had actually befallen the writer, Kanako Sakurai.

A bestial murder had occurred six years earlier.

The girl who was the child of the assailant and victim grew up and wrote about the event.

To this very day, she still lived in the house where her parents died.

The weeklies wrote it up and the book quickly became a best seller. But the author herself became the object of attention beyond even that.

“But as an editor, there’s no way you don’t publish a book like that. If I were Amano, I would have done the same thing absolutely. He couldn’t help but do it—there was genius in that novel, and it sinks its talons into your heart the instant you read it. When I read the manuscript, I thought, *Amano’s found a genuine author!*”

I wasn’t capable of that.

I almost groaned with the pain that steadily twisted my chest.

If something like that had happened at my house—I could never write about it in a novel.

But Kanako had.

And she had kept on writing after that.

She hadn't been crushed by the sensationalist media or the background noise. She had continued writing without letting any of it affect her, and Fumiharu had supported her as her editor.

"In a certain sense, Kanako may have had a closer relationship with Amano than even Yui, his wife," Mr. Sasaki murmured in a leaden tone. "Kanako often called her relationship with Amano a 'chaste union.' "

"A… chaste union?"

"That's what you call a marriage where the man and woman don't associate with each other. It's actually a phrase that means a husband and wife who don't have matrimonial relations… but Kanako was probably referring to her spiritual bond with Amano. They weren't married, but they were connected by a powerful bond, like a husband and wife who had made a promise in the eyes of God. Amano may have been the only person who was truly able to understand Kanako. Kanako probably knew that, too."

Slender fingers reached out from the past and scraped at my chest.

"Do you think Kanako loved Amano? Not just as an editor, but as a man?"

Mr. Sasaki pinched his face up, troubled.

"Well… I wonder. It may be that Kanako simply had a sense of competition with Yui. On days off, she would call Amano at home and summon him to the office out of nowhere or make ridiculous demands and put him in difficult positions. Maybe that was because she wanted to show Yui that he cared more about her as an author than about Yui, who was his wife.

"After Amano and Yui died, maybe those complex feelings forced Kanako to write *The Immoral Passage*. I was surprised when Kanako took Tohko in, but…"

There was silence again and Mr. Sasaki shook his head.

"The two of them probably were best friends after all. Even if they had their

share of jealousy and misunderstandings, I think the bond was strong."

The workings of Kanako's heart were utterly dark and inscrutable.

Mr. Sasaki also told me about Ryuto's father.

That he had been a boy, a teenager who hadn't yet reached his majority, named Takumi Suwa.

"In *The Immoral Passage*, Arisa is written as a woman who'll casually sleep with anyone, but Kanako thoroughly rejected that sort of thing and didn't get close to men.

"As far as I know, the only one Kanako actually dated was Takumi. But…"

Mr. Sasaki's words became evasive.

"Takumi had a lot of problems."

"Because of his age?"

At the time Takumi Suwa had been nineteen, six years younger than Kanako.

"Well, there was that… but he was flagrant in his relationships with women, and he was seeing a lot of girls besides Kanako. He wasn't going to school—he had a part-time job as a scout for adult entertainment bars and cabarets. His job was to talk to girls on the street and persuade them to work in the bars. And I heard he was doing a lot of suspicious work besides that."

"Why would Kanako be with a person like that?"

"It was a mystery to me, too. Obviously he was a terribly charming young man, aside from his conduct, but… Outwardly, Ryuto is exactly like him. He takes after his father in the way he seduces women, too. Though Ryuto would be better off not taking after him."

I watched him murmur worriedly. I could imagine that Ryuto resembled his father more than just outwardly; his personality and the impression he gave off were probably the same, too.

There's a youth in *The Immoral Passage* whom Kanako has a relationship with, too.

She didn't name him, but he is described as a shallow young man who called

out to Arisa on the street, “Hey, lady, you want a job?”

“Where’s Ryuto’s father now? Sakurai is Kanako’s maiden name, isn’t it? Did they get a divorce?”

Mr. Sasaki’s face clouded even more.

“No, Kanako and Takumi never registered for marriage. Six months before Ryuto was born, Takumi was hit by a car and killed.”

I swallowed thickly.

Ryuto’s father had died in a car accident, too? Was that a coincidence?

How had Kanako taken the death of Ryuto’s father?

Even if she ignored Tohko, did she cherish Ryuto? I couldn’t picture her showering a child with motherly affection.

Kanako, Ryuto, and Tohko.

What was their life together like, a life that had begun with the deaths of the Amanos?

At that point I realized something critical and I gasped.

Ryuto knew that Tohko ate books!

What about Kanako?

Did she know that Tohko ate books? That her father, Fumiharu, had eaten books, too?

If she did know, how long had she known?

Before the Amanos died? Or after?

“What’s wrong, Inoue? You look distracted.”

“Nothing… it’s just a lot to take in. I’m in shock.”

Mr. Sasaki frowned as if that was only natural.

“The environment around Kanako and Tohko is certainly a bit special. But Tohko really did grow up to be a kind and cheerful girl, warm just like her mother, Yui. And if you look past the fact that he’s too popular with girls, Ryuto is a good, honest kid, too. I think it was good for Kanako to have children like

Ryuto and Tohko around."

On an impulse, I asked Mr. Sasaki, who had been a close coworker of Fumiharu's, "Mr. Sasaki, *did Fumiharu eat books*?"

Mr. Sasaki's eyes popped open in shock.

Then, after looking me over closely, he laughed.

"Ha-ha-ha, of course not. Even Amano wouldn't go that far for a book. Though he did love them enough that you wouldn't blink twice if he did eat one. Now that you mention it, he was always saying things like, *'This book tastes like slow-broiled beef stew'* or *'This has the taste of stuffed waffles.'* Just like Tohko, actually."

I thanked Mr. Sasaki, then left the café.

I was cleaning out some drawers when I found an old album that brought back a lot of memories.

There were a bunch of photos of you and me from middle school in it, Kana! I sat down on the floor and spent over an hour looking through it.

There was you, all stuck-up, with your hair arranged above your shoulders, and there was me in my braids. I'm smiling in most of the pictures, probably because I'm happy I get to be with you.

There were also pictures of the school trip we took to Nagano in the spring of our third year of middle school.

In the group photo, you bet I'm standing next to you smiling. I had a barrette shaped like a violet in my hair. It was the hair accessory you gave me as a gift!

During the free period, the two of us went to a souvenir shop in the glass music box museum, and they had sparkling, transparent accessories lined up like jewels. I was the one who suggested we both buy something and give it to each other. I said that would make the trip way more memorable.

I bought you a bright blue glass pendant, and you picked out a hair accessory shaped like a violet for me.

Then, outside the museum, we opened our packages. My heart was

pounding pretty bad when I hung the pendant around your neck, Kana, and you were petulant and embarrassed when you fastened the violet barrette in my hair.

“Thank you! I’ll treasure this since you got it for me, Kana! I hope we stay friends for a long, long time.”

I said that after we took a picture, and you huffed, “We should head back,” then turned aside.

When I held your hand, you didn’t pull away until we got close to the buses where everyone was meeting.

You complained that if you were wearing something like that, the teacher would see it, then slipped it under your white camisole. I was so happy I thought my heart would tear itself apart.

When I think about the pendant I gave you glittering under your sailor suit in the group picture, even now my heart pounds loudly.

I treasured the violet barrette always.

I can’t wear it all the time like I did in middle school anymore, but sometimes I take it out and put my hair up with it.

When I do that, I feel as if I’ve gone back to those days.

“That violet is pretty, Mommy.”

Tohko looks up at me, her eyes sparkling.

“Mommy got this from someone she loves very much. It’s someone you know, too.”

And I told her the stories.

About the time I first met you, about the day we first spoke to each other, about the music box museum, about graduation…

My memories of you, Kana, so many of them, as if I were telling vivid fairy tales.

How very much I’d loved you.

About the gentle hours we’d spent together.

That we would always be friends.

Chapter 5—The Morning of Good-bye

“You should learn who Tohko Amano is…”

That’s what Ryuto had said.

But I had stalled out before I reached Tohko, without even understanding how her parents or Kanako had felt. And the whole time, Tohko’s figure seemed to be pulling away behind a pale, violet-colored curtain.

On the morning of Valentine’s Day, I went to school still feeling muddled.

I changed my shoes at the front entrance.

The girls and boys were buzzing and everyone seemed to be on edge.

Last year for Valentine’s Day, Tohko had given me chocolate.

I’d been a first-year and Tohko had been in her second year.

I’d gone to the clubroom like always and written an improv story, and Tohko had eaten it with plenty of sobbing and we’d had our ordinary interaction. And just as I’d been about to leave—“Here, Konoha.”

With a smile, Tohko held out an airy violet package wrapped in cloth-like paper she had covered with white lace paper.

It was tied up with light blue-and-gold ribbons, their ends arranged in twirling spirals, and it had white-and-yellow artificial flowers stuck into it. It was so girly and enthusiastic, I had to question if it was for real, and my face flushed red.

“Um, I…”

“Oh, come on! It’s Valentine’s Day!”

“Is it?”

“It’s a gift from your president.”

I accepted the flamboyant package awkwardly, which made Tohko beam even more. *“Go on, open it,”* she urged me excitedly.

There wasn’t actually homemade chocolate in there, was there?

Through my nerves, I untied the ribbons and opened the package. Laid out before me on the lace paper were milk chocolate drops, dark chocolate drops, almond chocolate drops, and on and on that all looked like they’d be sold for a dollar a bag at a grocery store.

My eyes unfocused at the chasm between the chocolates and the overwrought packaging while Tohko’s face turned toward me over the back of her chair, beaming like the sun.

“C’mon, it’s a holiday!”

Remembering that, I started to miss Tohko intensely.

Even if I saw her, I wouldn’t know what to talk about, and if what Tohko wanted was for Miu Inoue to write another book, I couldn’t do anything but deny her that.

And then we would just shout at each other again and have another misunderstanding.

Even so, I couldn’t help missing her.

Biting down on my lip, I shook off the image of Tohko’s smile that had surfaced in my memory and I headed to my classroom.

As soon as Kotobuki saw me, her expression relaxed with relief.

“Is today gonna be okay, Inoue?”

“Yeah, my afternoon’s all yours.”

When I said that, her cheeks turned bright red, and “O-okay… after school, then,” she whispered in a quiet, squeaky voice and then left me.

Akutagawa wasn’t at school that day.

The girls who'd wanted to give him chocolate were making a big fuss about it.

"Whaaaaat?! Akutagawa's out?!"

"No way! How could he? I brought him chocolate and everything!"

"Agggh! I even splurged on something fancy!"

"Did they say Akutagawa's not here?!"

I wondered what had happened. It was unusual for Akutagawa to be absent. He'd seemed fine yesterday, but maybe he'd caught a cold.

During lunch, Takeda came bearing chocolate.

"Here you go! It's thank-you chocolate in appreciation for all you do for me."

She said it with a bright smile as she held out a blue box with a polka-dot ribbon on it.

When Kotobuki glowered surreptitiously nearby, Takeda said, "I have some for you, too, Nanase! It matches Konoha's!" and held out a red box with the same design.

"Wh—f-for me?"

Grinning at Kotobuki's panic, Takeda said, "I give chocolate to my female friends, too! You're always helping me out with my job at the library!"

"Oh… uh, I mean… thanks."

"I'd like to see three times as much back from you for the next holiday."

"—Is that what you're after?"

"It's a joke. But I'll be hoping for it," Takeda said with a sunny expression.

"Argh, are you *actually* grateful or not? I-I'll accept it for now…"

Kotobuki muttered as she moved away.

I asked Takeda, "Are you meeting up with Ryuto today?"

"Yuuup. I'm his girlfriend. But we might be going with other girls."

When my face clouded over, she joked, "Oh, come on, don't look so serious! You make it look like I came to confess my love to you and I got dumped!" then

smiled benignly.

“It’s fun to have a boyfriend and give away chocolate on Valentine’s Day. And having a bunch of rivals just fires me up.”

“Is that true?”

Takeda’s grin filled her whole face again, like a puppy.

“Who can say? Oh, is there anything you’d like me to tell Ryu?”

“No, that’s okay. Have fun today. And hold on to Ryuto hard enough that he can’t do *any*thing.”

I wanted to at least spend today with Kotobuki. I didn’t want to make her feel any more nervous than I already had.

“Copy that!” Takeda replied in an exuberant voice, and then she departed with a wave.

When classes were over, Kotobuki came over wearing her coat and carrying her schoolbag, her lips pursed in a pretty, nervous way.

“L-let’s go, Inoue!”

“Huh? Weren’t we meeting at the library?”

Kotobuki pursed her lips even more.

“I don’t want us to miss each other again. Besides, today is Valentine’s Day, so no one’s paying attention to anyone else. Even Mori’s caught up in it.”

When she put it that way…

Kotobuki started walking off stiffly. I hurriedly put on my coat and picked up my bag.

“Inoue! Walk a little bit away from me.”

“I thought no one was paying attention?”

“S-still.”

Kotobuki looked embarrassed, so I dropped back slightly.

She stole a glance back, as if to make sure that I was still following her. I thought that looked more unnatural, but…

When we got to the shoe lockers, Kotobuki changed her shoes first. “I-I need to prepare myself, so I’m going outside, okay?” she said in a strained murmur, and hugging her bag tightly to her chest, she trooped quickly out.

Prepare herself? What?

When I went through the gate, she was already out of sight.

“What the?”

I craned my neck in every direction when—“Inoue…”—a quiet voice said.

When I looked in that direction, she was peeking her face around the corner. Her cheeks were bright red.

“Are you prepared?” I asked.

“Yeah…”

She nodded shyly and gently took my hand.

I squeezed hers back and we started walking like that, side by side.

Kotobuki’s house was a dry cleaner’s in a residential neighborhood. Her parents were regular office workers, but apparently her grandmother ran the shop.

The first floor of the rectangular three-story building was the shop, and the second and third floors were Kotobuki’s house. There were stairs on the outside of the building, and we went up to the second floor that way.

“Is it okay not saying hello to your grandma?”

“I-it’s fine today. Next time.”

Kotobuki pulled on my hand and went up the stairs.

“Are you an only child?”

“I have an older brother, but he’s a lot older, so he’s already got a job and he’s living on his own.”

“That’s the opposite of my family.”

As we chatted like that, we reached the front door on the second floor.

Kotobuki took a key out of her jacket pocket and unlocked the door. She

looked nervous again and her movements were awkward.

When she went in ahead of me, she glared back at me and—“Come in.”—she prompted.

“Thanks.”

She kept glancing over, then glancing away, as I came in and took my shoes off.

“Oh, that’s your room, huh?”

The second door after the entrance had a pink placard shaped like an alligator hanging on it that said NANASE’S ROOM.

Kotobuki’s eyes bugged out and she covered the placard with her back.

“I… I thought I took that down. God, Grandma,” she muttered in a vanishingly quiet voice, then reached her arms behind her, took the placard down, and held it against her ribs.

“Why are you taking it down?”

“It’s not usually up.”

“When do you put it up?”

“For New Year’s, stuff like that…”

“Why on New Year’s?”

“I-it’s not important. Just get in.”

She opened the door and pushed me toward the room.

“Ack!”

“I have to get some stuff. Wait here.”

She slammed the door shut in an apparent rush, then immediately opened the door again and came back in, her face all red.

She turned on the heater, set one of the pillows from her bed on the floor, then pulled some books and comics out of her bookshelf, took some CDs from her CD stand, and piled them all up on a small table.

“Sit here, listen to these, and read these.”

With that, she left again.

I took off my jacket and settled on the pillow, just as I'd been told.

From there, I looked around the room again.

Her curtains were a soft coral color with a pattern of white tulips. Her table was a wooden school desk that could be opened and closed, and there was a red-checked cushion on her chair.

The books neatly lined up on her shelves ranged from old literary works to best sellers, children's books, girls' comics, and other miscellany, and on the lowest shelf she had monthly comics anthologies, fashion magazines, and art books.

As I was looking around her room at the giraffe, panda, and other stuffed animals that populated it in places, struck by how girly a room it was, my eyes came to rest on a stuffed penguin.

"Wait…"

It was set on the table next to her bed with the other stuffed animals, but for some reason it was the only one with its back turned.

I reached out for it without much thought and turned it back around and saw a red ribbon tied around its neck. In the very center hung a badge shaped like a maple leaf—could this be…?

I picked the penguin up and examined it closely.

Yup, that was it.

My middle school emblem.

Instantly, I recalled my first meeting with Kotobuki.

How I had seen a girl on the street in trouble because her skirt was torn, so I unpinned my school's emblem (*"You can hold the tear together with this"*) and handed it to her.

I didn't look too closely at her face, so when I started high school and met Kotobuki again, I didn't have the slightest idea.

But Kotobuki had remembered me. She told me that she'd had a crush on me that whole time.

Kotobuki… you kept my emblem…

My cheeks started to burn and my chest pulled taut, and still holding the penguin in my arms, I gazed intently at the emblem, overcome with sentimentality when, behind me—“Ah! No!”—there came a voice.

When I turned around, Kotobuki was standing there, her eyebrows hiked up and flushed all the way to her ears, carrying a tray loaded with a flat, round chocolate cake and cups filled with coffee.

Apparently she’d changed clothes. When she’d gone out, she’d been wearing her uniform, but now she had on a soft-looking short-sleeved white sweater and a red-checked skirt. I never saw her carry any clothes out, so she must have set some aside outside her room.

Kotobuki set the tray on the table, then snatched the stuffed penguin out of my hands and hugged it tight.

“I even told you not to look around my room.”

“Uh… I don’t think you did tell me that.”

“E-even so, ogling everything in a girl’s room is a breach of etiquette!”

“I didn’t mean to ogle—it just caught my eye. That’s my school emblem, right?”

“A-a-a-and if it is?”

“Just, thanks for taking such good care of it.”

When I thanked her, Kotobuki turned even redder and dipped her head in embarrassment.

“I-I didn’t really…”

She planted her knees on the carpet and hid the stuffed penguin behind her back, then started arranging the cake and coffee cups on the table.

“Eat it before it gets cold,” she muttered sharply, still looking away.

“Let’s see, then.”

I readjusted my position on the cushion and picked up a fork.

The simple chocolate cake resting atop the white plate had cool whipped cream on the side.

I stuck my fork into it and warm chocolate oozed out with a sweet billow of steam.

It was a fondant au chocolat.

I took a bite and a rich acidity spread through my mouth.

When I tried it with some whipped cream, the warm chocolate and the cool cream blended together nicely and it tasted even better.

“H-how is it?”

“It’s really good.”

“I-it’s not too sweet?”

“Nope, it’s just the right amount of bitterness.”

“Good.”

Kotobuki’s face relaxed and a relieved smile came over it.

When I saw her face, even though I had dark chocolate in my mouth, I started to feel incredibly sweet.

“Um, do you… want to listen to some music?”

“Sure.”

“What do you want to listen to?”

“Hmmm. *Beauty and the Beast*?”

“Th-th-th-th-that’s not—”

“You don’t have it?”

“I-I do! But—”

“Then let’s listen to that.”

“O… okay.”

Kotobuki rummaged through her CD tower.

I watched her as I ate my fondant au chocolat, and once again I discovered something unusual.

“I didn’t know you collected coins.”

“Wha—?”

Holding the soundtrack for Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* in her hand, Kotobuki started and spun around.

She followed my gaze, then blanched for some reason.

I was looking at the second shelf from the top of her bookcase, where some books were leaning to one side because Kotobuki had pulled those paperbacks out, leaving an empty space. A placard about the size of a bookmark with a five hundred–yen and ten-yen coin in it was sticking out behind the leaning books.

“Were those coins from a limited minting or something?”

“Uh, well—”

Kotobuki opened her mouth, then shut it again, then opened and shut it once more.

“Do you mind if I look at them?”

“You can’t do that!”

Kotobuki stood up suddenly, and just as she’d hugged the stuffed penguin before, she grabbed the placard holding the coins in both hands and pressed it tightly against her chest to hide it.

“Why not?”

“You just can’t!”

She refused intently.

“Um… that reminds me, right after we started school this year, you made me pay to replace a library book. *The Great Gatsby*, remember? I’m pretty sure that was five hundred yen, too.”

Kotobuki had forced me to compensate her for a book Tohko had eaten.

“I paid you the money and the next day you brought me fifty yen in change, and I paid you back the ten yen change for that.”

Was that—?

Kotobuki pulled her face into a frown and glowered at me, her face bright red. She had the very beginnings of tears in her eyes.

“That five hundred–yen…”

And ten yen on top of that…

“Is *that* five hundred yen?”

Actually, 510 yen.

“I-I don’t remember!”

Kotobuki was breathing very faintly now, and she turned her face to one side, the coins still pressed against her chest.

Judging from her reaction, I saw that it pretty much had to be the same coins, and my cheeks instantly grew hot, too.

It wasn’t just my school emblem; she’d held on to things like that, too. She was probably embarrassed to have me see the coins, so she’d hidden them behind the books.

“Why do you care?! I don’t remember, okay?!”

She hunkered down on the carpet and wailed, her face bright red, and I scooted over to her on my knees and brought my face close to hers. She became instantly quiet and her eyes widened.

“Um, I…”

Kotobuki’s hair had the sweet aroma of chocolate followed by the slight smell of citrus. It must have soaked it up when she was getting everything ready.

My face was burning, too.

“I guess… that makes me happy.”

Kotobuki’s eyes widened even further and then—“R-really?”—she looked away shyly and her lips curved into a small smile.

As I, too, flushed, as if a light had turned on in my heart, I asked, “Could we listen to the CD?”

“Okay…!”

Finally, the theme song from *Beauty and the Beast* started to fill the room.

It was our song.

On that snow-piled roof, this clear melody had pulled me back and given me courage.

“This is the English version, huh?”

“I have the Japanese one, too.”

“When the English one ends, let’s listen to that one then.”

“Okay.”

Sitting across from each other at the little table, eating cake and drinking coffee, talking as we listened to the music.

That’s all we did, but it was a lot of fun and a little bit ticklish.

Each aware of the other’s existence, heart fluttering.

Kotobuki seemed to be wondering about what kind of chocolate Takeda had given me, so—“Let’s open it and see.”—I said. She untied the ribbon on the chocolate Takeda had given her, too, and started loudly pulling the paper off.

“She said they matched.”

“I just don’t know if that’s true. There could be an eraser in mine that says YOU LOSE.”

She doesn’t trust Takeda at all…

When we got all the wrapping paper off, two perfectly square boxes were revealed with the same design in different colors. Mine was blue and Kotobuki’s was red. Just like the wrapping paper.

“Let’s open them at the same time. One, two—”

At Kotobuki’s mark, we lifted the lids off simultaneously.

We each found a half-missing chocolate heart.

Kotobuki had the right half of the heart. I had the left.

“So this is what she meant when she said they matched. I’m glad it’s not an eraser.”

“Urk… I-I was joking when I said that.”

I suggested we try fitting them together, and Kotobuki reeled with a “Huh?!”

“Look, Kotobuki.” I picked up my heart and reached out a hand, which Kotobuki blushed at and brought her heart closer.

The two halves fit together and became a single heart.

“Perfect.”

“Yeah.”

We smiled shyly.

Then we carefully returned the hearts to their boxes and our eyes met and again we both looked embarrassed.

“Did you know that I had chocolate to give you last year for Valentine’s Day, too?”

Kotobuki made an unexpected confession.

“What? Really?”

“I thought you might not accept it if it was homemade, so I bought it at a store… but I put a lot of effort into choosing it! But still, I didn’t manage to give it to you. I made it all the way to the classroom, but then I got embarrassed and held back. I think I ate half of it by myself at home.”

After she’d said that, her face became suddenly sad and she dropped her gaze.

“What’s wrong?”

“… I was just remembering Yuka.”

My heart clenched.

Yuka Mito was a girl who’d been Kotobuki’s best friend, a classmate from middle school. She’d died the year before, before Christmas.

“… When I was stuffing myself with chocolate, I got a call from Yuka and she told me, ‘You can’t eat all of it by yourself. Leave me some, too.’ And then, the next day… she ate the chocolate with me.”

Seeing Kotobuki drooping made it hard for me to breathe, too.

Kotobuki blinked, as if chasing away her tears, then lifted her face and smiled.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to bring things down. Yuka would be angry at me. She’d say this was no time to talk about stuff like that.”

“It’s fine. She really cared about you a lot, didn’t she?”

“Yeah. And I liked her a lot, too. I’ll be best friends with Yuka forever,” Kotobuki declared, her gaze clear—her voice cheerful—and it made her look strong and amazing.

For only a moment, Tohko’s mother, Yui, and Kanako flashed through my mind.

Mr. Sasaki had said they were best friends.

Had Yui and Kanako’s relationship been as strong and certain as Kotobuki and Mito’s? Or…

“Oh! That’s right! There was something else I never managed to give you.”

Kotobuki stood up, interrupting my thoughts.

She opened a drawer on her desk and pulled out a postcard, then held it out to me in both hands, fidgeting.

“It—it’s pretty late now, but it was to say hi over the summer. You can… take it now, if you want.”

The postcard was printed with a drawing of pink and pale green morning glories, accompanied by a message in light blue pen.

Thank you for coming to see me in the hospital.

I’m really sorry I chased you off.

I was actually really happy you came.

I hope we can talk more next term.

The feelings the postcard revealed seemed to echo through my heart.

Her youthful emotions spread through my chest to fill it. Just looking at the faint writing on the postcard in my hand, I started to feel indulgent and affectionate.

Kotobuki was looking at me nervously.

I looked at her and smiled.

“I got it. Thanks.”

Kotobuki smiled happily.

I thought it made her look very cute and dear.

That term was over and only a little time was left in the last one, but I hoped we would talk more and that I could find out more about her.

While I was looking down at the morning glories and the warm words written on the postcard, I suddenly realized something.

“Oh yeah—there’s something I never gave you, either.”

“Really? What?”

“I’ll bring it tomorrow.”

She broke into a smile, and excited, she asked, “Whaaat? It’s going to bug me.”

“Then let’s meet up halfway tomorrow and go to school together.”

When I said that, Kotobuki smiled way more and nodded. “Okay!”

When I got back home, I ran up the stairs and started searching my drawers without even changing clothes.

“I was sure I stuck it in here somewhere.”

As I went past handkerchiefs and belts, I focused my eyes, feeling the same butterflies as if I were searching for treasure.

Finally, the package I sought appeared among my socks.

“There it is!”

I cheered despite myself.

When I tore open the wrinkled bag with the name of a souvenir shop on it, a phone strap with a pink woven ball on it spilled out.

It was the one Tohko had made me buy when we’d stayed at Maki’s villa over

summer vacation. I hadn't had a chance to give it to Kotobuki and it had ended up stuffed away in my drawer.

I grabbed it and held it up in front of me, making the pretty little ball dance.

I hope you'll like this, Kotobuki.

The corners of my mouth relaxed and I gazed at the ball with ticklish feelings.

The pink ball swaying and twisting.

The fragrance of grass.

Summer vacation, trembling at the waterside.

Suddenly—

Something stroked a soft spot deep in my chest.

H-hey—what was this feeling?

It hurt—the same instant I felt that, the estate deep in the mountains, lit by the setting sun, resurfaced vividly in my mind.

A scarlet ball rolling energetically over the grass.

A wide street lined with souvenir shops.

Masses of almost stifling green. The mysterious pond filled with deep, silent water, as if hiding among the trees.

The songs of birds. The refreshing summer breeze running over the back of my neck.

A fluttering white dress. Long, dancing braids—

Once I'd remembered one thing, the rest floated up in my mind like flipping through the pages of a book.

Tohko bathed in the burning evening sunlight, her loose hair swaying, her eyes shining, running toward me, saying, "You came!"

Tohko so afraid of ghosts that she huddled in my bed, not moving, looking like she was about to cry, quaking and telling me, "I'll keep watch for you to make sure no ghosts come in here."

Tohko excitedly choosing books in a small bookstore. Tohko, her voice

exuberant, as she told the cashier, “Can you gift wrap those, please?” Wrapping paper the color of dark tea. A golden ribbon.

Yuri and Akira’s book room. Tohko skimming through the pages of a book on a chaise lounge, her contented smile. How we had sat in the same chair and read a book together, reading the character’s lines aloud.

The feelings were bubbling up unstoppably, like the cascade of a waterfall spilling violently into a deep pool.

That mysterious summer.

The eerily beautiful story of flowers and moonlight.

Tohko putting on a raincoat and frantically coming to search for me in the rain and thunder, despite her fear of the darkness.

Her voice calling my name.

Her hand holding mine.

And then the sadness of her gaze tinged in the pale white light of dawn.

Tohko, her eyes lowered, looking at me as I slept.

The evanescent murmur that had dropped from her lips.

“I wonder… how much longer… can I be here?”

Tohko, who seemed as if she might melt away at any moment into the space between reality and fiction.

She had turned her back on me and said, “I can’t tell you,” over and over and clung to me as if her feelings were spilling over, then complained through gritted teeth, “All you do is torment me.”

That day, Tohko bit my hand, and it had been swathed in a searing heat and started to throb.

“I won’t forget it.”

“After all, you were here with me.”

Tohko smiling, her eyes warm and her hand locked with mine on a moonlit path.

“I won’t *forget it.”*

A summer like a dream—like a story.

“I won’t forget it.”

My heart trembled and several times a hot lump rose in my throat. My eyelids burned.

Why hadn’t I remembered until now?

Why was I remembering now, like this, here?

Tohko had been hiding something from me that day.

She’d been sad and alone.

And yet she’d pretended that nothing was wrong and smiled kindly for me in the moonlight, like a pretty flower.

How had I forgotten?

Even though Tohko had looked so sad that morning when she’d murmured and brushed her trailing hair from my cheek.

Still clutching the phone strap in my hand, I crouched down on the carpet.

As I fought back the memories and the stabbing pain pressing in on me, I grit my teeth and hung my head.

At the base of the stairs, my mother called, “Time for dinner!” But I couldn’t go right now. I couldn’t let them see my face so twisted with suffering. My throat burned. My eyelids felt like they were on fire, too.

Fighting the continuing ache, stifling my voice, what ran through my mind were Tohko’s white hands and her gentle smile.

I couldn’t sleep that night.

Even though I’d had such a good time with Kotobuki, all I thought about was Tohko. My body hurt all over, as if it were being pulled apart.

When it started getting light beyond the curtain, my eyes were all puffy and my throat was sharply dry.

I climbed out of bed with sluggish motions, went down to the bathroom on the

first floor still in my pajamas, and washed my face in the tepid water. The mirror showed my face looking utterly exhausted.

I was supposed to meet up with Kotobuki this morning…

I tried again—this time I washed my face with cold water, like slapping myself in the face, and tried to change the course of my feelings. But Tohko's phantom clung to my mind.

I changed into my uniform and forced myself to take bites of the bacon and eggs, salad, and toast my mother had made.

Something like this had happened before.

The morning of the culture fair.

When I had overlaid myself on Akutagawa's suffering and fled, afraid of getting hurt.

Tohko had stood in the road, just after a rainstorm, bathed in pure light with a collection of poems by Robert Browning in her hand. And then she had smiled at me.

"Good morning, Konoha."

I put my coat on and left the house earlier than usual.

Outside, the sky was covered in ashen clouds, and the air was cold enough to make my hands numb.

Even after I'd cut through the mazelike neighborhood and come out on a perfectly straight tree-lined road, there was no sign of a book girl reading a book.

There was no reason to think Tohko *would* be there.

This fact made it feel like my heart was tearing in half.

Soon I would be at the convenience store where Kotobuki and I were meeting. I had to smile.

I clenched my cold hands tight, tensed the muscles in the corners of my mouth, and turned the corner, when— "Good morning, Konoha."

Tohko was standing there.

Wearing her navy-blue duffle coat over her school uniform, holding her schoolbag and a paper bag in her hands. Breathing in white puffs. With a gentle smile— I stood there in a daze; then my head and cheeks grew hot, as if they'd been lit on fire, and my heart pounded in a frenzied dance.

What was Tohko doing here?! Was she an illusion? No, she was real.

Tohko, who had appeared at my house a few days before, her face as pale as someone deathly ill, and railed at me in a trembling voice. She looked at me now with the same peaceful gaze she'd always had.

"I came to give you back your scarf. I'm busy studying for my exams, so I won't be able to see you pretty much at all."

She held the paper bag out to me.

"… Have you been waiting for me long?"

Tohko's voice and the way she looked at me were so exactly like usual that I was confused as I asked her that.

"Just for a bit."

But when I took the bag and brushed her hand for an instant, she was as cold as ice.

"Your eyes are swollen, Konoha. Did you get enough sleep?"

Why was she bothering to worry about me?

My throat squeezed tight and an unreasonable anger welled up in me.

Even though she hadn't told me the truth. Even though she'd ignored my wishes and tried to force me to write. Why would she worry about me?! Even though her hands were much, much colder than mine.

"You have to get a good night's sleep. Even if you don't sleep, you should lie down and close your eyes. If you do that, eventually you'll be able to fall asleep."

She spoke in a sisterly tone and opened her bag.

"And this is something for you."

She pulled out a long, thin glossy bag and showed it to me with a smile.

“Yesterday was Valentine’s Day, after all.”

The bag was violet cellophane, its top tied with a gold ribbon.

I accepted it from her and found it was heavy and dense.

“Chocolate…?”

“Nope. It’s red bean jelly.”

Tohko answered offhandedly.

I think I might have told her once that I preferred red bean jelly to chocolate…

“It’s… holiday jelly.”

For the briefest moment, she looked at me sadly and her lips alone formed a faint—a truly faint, evanescent smile.

“C’mon, it’s a holiday!”

The smile that I’d seen a year ago, as brilliant as the sun, overlaid itself on her and it felt like my chest was being crushed.

Tohko quickly got a sunny expression back, then—“I’ll head off now. Thank you for letting me use your scarf. Good-bye.”—she said and turned her back.

When Tohko said, “Good-bye,” and not, “See you later,” I felt a fiery panic.

The atmosphere was cold enough to stab the skin, the clouds were heavy, and everything was obscured in gray.

Tohko was leaving!

She was disappearing right in front of me!

I started to run after her and call out for her to wait, then stopped with a jolt.

Kotobuki’s face was peeking out worriedly from around the opposite corner.

My feet came to a stop, as if they were stitched to the ground.

It was as if the impulse that had flared up had been splashed with cold water. Kotobuki had her hands clasped tightly in front of her chest, and her imploring, mournful gaze was turned on me.

Tohko’s delicate frame—her long, swaying, diaphanous braids—was growing

distant.

I couldn't get my voice out.

Kotobuki and I looked at each other for a while on the frozen morning road.

Once Tohko's figure had disappeared around a corner, Kotobuki put on an awkward smile, which looked forced.

"We ran into each other before we got where we were supposed to meet."

"… We sure did."

I, too, desperately tensed the corners of my mouth. But it probably didn't look like I was smiling.

"Did you plan to meet Tohko, too?"

"No. She came to return a scarf she borrowed from me. She said this red bean jelly was for me."

"Ah…"

Kotobuki didn't comment on the fact that the contents of the cutely wrapped package was bean jelly and not chocolate. How long had she been listening to my conversation with Tohko? What had my face looked like when I saw Tohko?

"Hey, we're going to be late. Let's go to school, Inoue."

My heart clenched as Kotobuki tried her hardest to smile.

"Yeah," I answered tersely and put the bag of red bean jelly in the paper bag. The wind gusted hard and I pulled my head into my shoulders. I pulled out the white scarf Tohko had just returned and caught the fragrance of violets.

"Good-bye."

I saw Tohko's face smiling over the scarf and pain welled up deep in my throat.

I was starting to clumsily wrap it around my neck to drive the image away when— Kotobuki put her hand against the back of mine.

When I stared at her in surprise, she was frowning, her face sullen and on the verge of tears.

"Could I… have that scarf?"

“Wha—?”

“I’ve been wanting one that color.”

Kotobuki looked up at me desperately. Her hand was trembling on top of mine.

“I want your scarf.”

Below Kotobuki’s hand, the back of my hand burned like fire where Tohko had bitten it that summer.

“… Okay,” I agreed with a bitter smile. “Sure.”

“Would you… wrap it for me?”

I took the scarf in both hands and circled it around Kotobuki’s neck, just like she wanted. Kotobuki watched uneasily, holding her breath, as I wrapped it in two layers.

When I took my hands away from the scarf, I felt as if Tohko’s white hands had slipped out of mine.

“Is that good?”

Kotobuki smiled brightly, looking as if she was about to cry.

“Yup! Thank you. I love it. I’ll take good care of it.”

A bond with Tohko had been severed. As I became aware of that pain, I saw Kotobuki’s clumsy smile—her determined smile—and thought, *I’m okay with that*.

If I kept the scarf, I knew it would make me remember Tohko. So I was okay with it.

Besides, Kotobuki was smiling.

We held hands until we were close to school, and then we went in.

It was after we’d reached our classroom that I realized I’d forgotten the phone strap at home.

It’s been seven years now since Takumi died, I think.

I still think about him from time to time.

I was supposed to meet you in front of a building in Shinjuku, but I was a little late. A man I didn't recognize had started talking to you.

You had your face turned away in annoyance, but he was oblivious and had a sunny, charming, and vivacious expression—

That was Takumi, wasn't it?

Back then you coldly said, "He's a scout for a cabaret. He's so frivolous, just awful." But in my heart I was shocked that there was someone with the courage to scout you for a cabaret!

Most men would be hesitant to even speak to you because you're so very beautiful. But Takumi didn't even think about it.

It was the first time I'd ever seen a boy approach you that brazenly and keep on talking and having fun even when you ignored him.

I think it was about six months later that you started going out with Takumi.

When I invited you to the house for Tohko's first doll festival, you breezed in with him.

Takumi told me that you had run into each other again by chance outside the same building in Shinjuku. "That's gotta be destiny! Right? Right? You agree, don'cha, Yui?" he said in the same cheerful, lighthearted tone as half a year earlier.

That was when I first learned that Takumi was an adolescent of eighteen years of age.

Since he was so young, at first I was worried about you two going out. Besides, he was always interacting with so many women, I suppose as part of his scouting job, and there was so much risk in that regard that it exhausted me.

But Takumi could be childishly meek and innocent, too, despite how big he was physically.

Good at sweet-talking, good at apologizing, when he said, "Sorry," to you with a mischievous glint in his eye, you'd find your cheeks lifting in a smile and you'd forgive him.

Really, Takumi felt like a little brother who needed looking after. I helped him out in so many ways, he even called me a nice lady.

Tiny little Tohko would crawl up to him, and he would lift her up high and smile as he told her, "When you grow up, you come and marry Uncle Takumi." That made me smile, too.

Plus, Takumi was even good at listening.

Like a whimsical cat. He did exactly as he pleased, but before you realized it, he was at your side, listening attentively to what you were saying.

"You got somethin' on your mind, Yui? Why don'cha tell your baby bro all about it?"

When Takumi said that to me in his casual tone, it caught me off guard.

I mean, why would anything be bothering me?

"Oh, gosh, are you planning on being a life coach? I'm not going to risk getting myself indebted to you. I'm very happy."

"Really? I bet you haven't been sleepin' lately."

"That's been going on for a while. When I'm waiting for Fumiharu, I find myself staying up all night. After all, when Fumiharu gets home, I want to greet him with a smile and say, 'Welcome home.' "

"Does your man come home late that often? What's he doin'?"

"He's working, of course. Besides, ever since Tohko was born, he comes straight home except when they're doing final proofing. And he plays with her on his days off."

But you know, Kana.

I was so very happy that it scared me.

"Aaagh, we *are* late. This is your fault, Inoue!"

"Sorry."

We ran into the classroom right before homeroom started.

As both of our shoulders heaved with our breathing, Mori came over, grinning

mischievously.

“Looks like yesterday went well. Showing up at school together, that’s bold!”

“Uh, well…”

“I-it’s not like that, Mori.”

Mori peered up at my face when I responded, flustered.

“Did Nanase’s chocolate taste good?”

“… Y-yeah.”

“Wow! Did you hear that, Nanase? That’s great! Congrats! That’s a load off my mind.”

Mori threw her arms around Kotobuki.

“D-don’t talk so loud, Mori.”

Kotobuki’s eyes were panicked.

The teacher came in, and we were finally able to go to our seats.

Kotobuki was ferociously typing out a text message. She was probably writing to Mori telling her not to run her mouth.

I noticed that Akutagawa’s chair was empty again today, and my heart skipped a beat.

Being absent for two days in a row…

He must be pretty sick. I thought about texting him later.

When class started, a muddy weariness came over me. My body was heavy and my mind was a haze. It felt like all of my senses were numbed, and it had become harder for my heart to feel anything.

And running into Tohko and exchanging those few words with her… and her giving my scarf back… and the way she had smiled gently when she told me good-bye… it felt like it had happened a long time ago.

No, it wasn’t like that.

A slight pain stabbed through my chest.

I dulled my heart *so that I didn't feel anything anymore*.

Because if I didn't, it felt like my chest was going to be ripped apart. Because it felt like I would chase after her, cling to her arm, and scream like a little kid.

Because it felt like I would attack her, sobbing, "What's the secret you're hiding? Isn't it cowardly to leave without telling me about it?"

At the break, Mori grabbed hold of Kotobuki. It looked like she was getting grilled about yesterday. She was alternately turning red, pursing her lips, or bugging her eyes out.

After I sent a text to Akutagawa, I spaced out at my desk.

Outside the window was a gray scene of winter bleakness.

It might snow again…

During second period English, my phone vibrated for a second in my pocket.

It was probably a response from Akutagawa.

I snuck a look to see who it was from. It was Kotobuki.

Surprised, I looked over at her and she turned her blushing face away.

> Do you want to eat lunch together in one of the open classrooms?
>
> I'm not asking because Mori told me to!
>
> P.S. What was that thing you were going to give me?

Oh—the phone strap. I'd left it in my room!

That finally made me realize my slipup, and I hurriedly sent her a reply.

> Sorry. I forgot it at home. I'll bring it tomorrow.
>
> Lunch is cool.

Kotobuki looked down at her cell phone's screen with an extremely tense expression.

Then she glanced covertly at me and smiled ever so slightly in embarrassment.

After that she turned away again and wouldn't look at me at all.

When class was nearing its end, my cell phone vibrated again.

Kotobuki…?

I opened my phone under my desk and saw I'd gotten a text message. As soon as I checked who'd sent it, the numb sensation I'd had till then vanished in a flash. It was like I'd been punched in the face.

Ryuto!

My heart started pounding hard, my head and throat grew hot, and I broke out in a sweat.

I'm done playing around.

When you're done with that class, I need you to get your things and come to the school gate.

I should just ignore a text like that.

Then I'd be able to go back to my ordinary life. I would stop making Kotobuki look worried.

I stared at the screen so long my eyes started to lose focus, and I clenched my jaw.

The bell announcing the end of the period rang out coldly overhead. The teacher put away the textbook and left.

The classroom filled with the racket of a break in classes.

Kotobuki approached me shyly.

I shut my phone and stood up.

"Sorry, lunch might be out."

"Wha—?"

I kept my face turned to one side, unable to look Kotobuki in the face any longer, while I grabbed my bag and coat, then hurried out of the room.

My entire body was wreathed in a fiery rage.

It was rage at Ryuto, but at the same time it was rage that boiled up at myself, too.

“You should learn who Tohko Amano is…”

Then quit hitting me over the head like this and tell me!

Tell me what’s going on in Tohko’s head! Tell me why she said I had to write!

I changed my shoes at the entrance and rushed outside. I was still carrying my coat in my hand, so it felt as if the cold were slicing at my skin through my clothes.

Leaden clouds releasing flakes of snow covered the sky.

Blowing puffs of white with my breath, I ran toward the school gates.

Kana, do you know who Ole Lukøje is?

Ole Lukøje, the fairy of sleep from a Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale.

He wears no shoes and makes no sound as he steals up to children and casts sweet milk in their eyes, *whoosh!* and charms them into slumber.

Under each of his arms, he carries a long umbrella, and over the good children he opens the umbrella with pictures drawn on it. When he does that, those children have fun dreams all night long.

Over the bad children he opens the umbrella with nothing drawn on it. Those children sleep deeply, without dreaming at all.

The day before he died, Takumi gave me a little violet-colored bottle.

It was cute, shaped like a heart, with fine silver dust in it.

“It’s the sleeping powder of Ole Lukøje,” Takumi whispered, gazing into my eyes.

He said that if I took this, all of my pain and sadness would melt away like snow. I wouldn’t feel hatred, doubt, or jealousy. I’d be able to sleep untainted, as if cradled in the arms of God.

He said that I could take some, and I could let other people have some, too.

The next day Takumi jumped into the road and was taken to heaven. He was only nineteen.

The snow stuck to my face and turned into tepid droplets of water.

The snow that fell on my eyelashes got into my eyes and blurred my vision.

When I reached the gates, a taxi stopped right in front of me. The rear door opened and someone got out.

Short hair, a straight, tall back.

Wearing an honest gaze I knew well—

Akutagawa!

What was Akutagawa doing here?! I thought he was out sick. Was it just a coincidence that he'd appeared at the gate right then? Or could it be— Akutagawa bent at the waist and stretched a hand into the car. It looked like he was helping someone inside get out.

Pock… the soft sound of an aluminum cane hitting the road.

No—

My heart stopped.

The snow fell like cold flower petals. Her skirt billowed in the wind and rippled slightly.

Pale skin. A fragile body.

Big eyes.

Lips the color of cherries.

"Ko-no-ha."

A bright, clear voice called to me through the gate as I stood rooted inside.

Akutagawa held her up and a peaceful smile came over her face. It was Miu.

Chapter 6—The Two Stories of Death

The winter of my second year of middle school. There was a girl I liked very much.

I wanted to tell her how much I liked her, so I wrote a novel.

But my novel ended up making her suffer and haunting her, and one day early in the summer, she jumped off the roof right in front of me.

“You would never understand, Konoha.”

Murmuring that with a desolate smile.

Now she was sitting across the table from me.

We’d moved to a café a short distance from the school.

My emotions had done a somersault in the taxi, and I didn’t know what I should ask first. Akutagawa had told me, his face serious, “I’m Asakura’s escort,” and Miu had spoken in a cheerful tone, saying, “Long time no see!” and “I got permission to leave the hospital this time.”

“Is tea okay, Inoue?” Akutagawa asked, sitting in the seat diagonally across from me.

“Uh, sure…”

I nodded. He ordered for everybody when the waitress came to take our order, then turned face forward again.

Miu looked at me with placid eyes the entire time.

At last her cherry-colored lips curved up and she smirked.

“Don’t keep that surprised look going for so long. I gave you fair warning, didn’t I? I said I would get better and come see you next time. Maybe it’s earlier than you expected, though. I’ve been doing *real* good since that last time we saw each other.”

The brilliant smile like sunlight trickling through leaves spread over her small face, the smile I’d adored ever since we were children.

I’d thought that the next time I met Miu would be a time for beginnings and a time for endings.

I’d been hearing about Miu’s situation the whole time from Akutagawa, but actually seeing her, I got the powerful impression that she was different, not the Miu I’d known since we were children and not the Miu who’d hurled her hatred at me through tears on the roof as snow fell around us. She was a new, matured Miu.

“Was Ryuto the one who called you here?”

“Yup.”

Of course. The thought made my breathing strained.

Akutagawa had told me about it before with a grumpy look, how Ryuto was still visiting her.

“Why would Ryuto want to make you come see me?”

“I think he wants me to get you to write another novel.”

A sharp pain ran through my chest.

Miu’s eyes grew steely and her face stiffened.

“He told me I had to be the one to convince you. Because what happened to me was the reason you stopped writing.”

The novel I’d written had hurt Miu.

I remembered Miu wailing torturously in the middle of a snowstorm, “*I’m not clean and honest the way you wrote Hatori in your book,”* and it felt as if my throat would tear itself apart. My heart was crushed.

A scream, a confession, that practically brought up blood.

A hopeless pilgrim who'd had their slumber stolen from them.

My novel had destroyed Miu's entire world.

While I was criticizing Kanako for writing about the deaths of the Amanos and her own parents, I had done the very same thing, though there was a difference in our subject matter.

Through my writing, I had shredded another person's heart.

"Don't get me wrong, I don't resent the fact that you modeled your novel on us anymore. Or the fact that you won the prize and debuted with the pen name Miu Inoue—I mean, I would be lying if I said it didn't bug me *at all*… but I don't care if you write a new novel. It's just—"

Miu's eyes turned steely again.

"I hate going along with Sakurai's plots," she declared fiercely.

The drinks we'd ordered arrived.

Miu took a swig of her caffe latte with cream and scrunched her face up at how hot it was, then put the cup back down. She took a quick sip of water from a glass with ice in it, set that on the table too, then looked squarely back at me.

"I'm not going to fall into line for Ryuto Sakurai ever again. But Kazushi told me you were acting weird, and I was worried that Sakurai was doing something to you. So I came to see you because it's what *I* wanted to do. Sakurai said he would bring you to the hospital, but I told him I would go see you myself so he didn't need to bother."

She announced this crisply, then took a slow, cautious drink of her slightly cooler caffe latte.

Despite the situation, I thought, *Oh, right… Miu's tongue burns easily…*

"What do you want to do, Konoha?"

I couldn't answer right away.

"I… don't want to write another novel."

The words that finally emerged from my mouth shook slightly and sounded pitifully frail.

“I see…”

A shadow fell over Miu’s face.

“That’s… for the best.”

It was the same thing Kanako had told me. It was just that Kanako’s words had been as cold as ice, whereas Miu’s had a hint of warmth in them.

Still holding the cup in both hands, her look dark, Miu whispered, “I… think it’s best that you don’t go back to being Miu Inoue, too. After all, if you became Miu Inoue, you’d get hurt. Everyone would be focused on you and say whatever they wanted about you—people you don’t even know would hate you. You’d get kicked around, you’d get scorned, and they’d cut you to shreds with their words.

“Of course, I’m sure there would be tons of people who would love another book by Miu. There are people waiting for the next book even now—but you know what, Konoha?”

Miu’s expression was grim.

“Readers betray authors.”

Her words shot into my chest like arrows, digging into my flesh.

“You may write because you want to see people smiling, but all they do is make selfish demands. You don’t communicate your own thoughts. They selfishly adore you, selfishly get disappointed, and selfishly hate you. One day, all of a sudden, without giving it a second thought, they become indifferent toward you. And soon they forget. Then they find a different author.”

I was desperately fighting back the pain as sharp as arrowheads scraping around inside my body.

What Miu said was true.

I knew that because I was a reader who had betrayed an author—an author named Miu.

I’d felt a selfish admiration for her, hadn’t noticed how she truly felt when she put those feelings in her stories, had constantly demanded that she write the next story even after she’d lost her ability to write.

Back then, I'd done exactly what Tohko was doing now.

"Why aren't you writing?" "C'mon, write what happens next." "I love your stories, Miu. You have to let me read more, Miu. Write!"

The innocent, selfish, pitiless reader—so then was Tohko the reader who had betrayed me?

"Readers don't realize that authors suffer. If you look at it from their perspective, reading the book, that suffering doesn't matter. Just like authors write without worrying about their readers' individual situations…"

After that burst of words, she dropped her eyes.

" 'Being an author is a line of work in which you pass through a narrow gate alone'… Sakurai's mother wrote that in her afterword. Kanako Sakurai—you know about her, right? She wrote *The Immoral Passage*."

Hearing Miu speak Kanako's name and the title of her book made me jump.

Her eyes still lowered, Miu whispered, "I've read a lot of her books. I've written about my hatred for you, too, but… it was different from Kanako Sakurai's novels. I don't know how she can write such raw, murky stories in that cold, transparent way. There's a little girl named Toco in the book. It's…"

Miu trailed off.

She was, after all, probably hesitant to say what happened in the novel to the girl who shared Tohko's name.

She bit her lip slightly, then murmured in a voice touched with pain.

"I think… Kanako Sakurai is a true author. But I think it would be tough on you to try and approach the same gate as her. That severe lifestyle, throwing everything away like she did to chase a single supreme achievement…"

She gazed at me consolingly.

"You're not like me, Konoha," she whispered. "You didn't start out wanting to be an author…"

Her face was somehow bitter and sad.

We went our separate ways from the café.

Miu went out leaning on Akutagawa.

“I told you how I feel. If you want to write, go ahead,” she declared, casting the words at me pointedly, her face open to the end.

Akutagawa, who had kept his silence at Miu’s side, turned earnest eyes on me just as we were parting and said, “Inoue, no matter how much you run around, you can’t go down two paths at the same time. You should stop here and think about which path is the most rewarding one for you until you can accept it. I’ll help you whenever I can.”

“Thanks.”

I watched the two of them leave.

My mood was still bleak. I sat on a couch in the café and reflected on what Miu had told me.

“… If you became Miu Inoue again, you’d get hurt.”

“Readers betray authors.”

It wasn’t just readers who betrayed people. Authors betrayed readers, too. One day, all of a sudden, they would just stop writing.

Readers and authors—the thread that tied them together was extremely tenuous and could be snapped instantly. There was no such thing as a sure connection.

I knew that. And yet. When I remembered the sight of Tohko, enveloped in the golden light of sunset in the tiny book club room, tearing the stories I’d written into little pieces and bringing them reverently to her mouth, my throat burned and my chest fluttered.

“Yummmm! Today’s snack is a winner!”

Tohko smiling contentedly.

Every single day I had written improv stories as snacks for her. No matter how unappetizing the story was, Tohko had finished it. Even if we didn’t say anything to each other, I would turn to my paper and write, and beside me Tohko would thumb through a book—just that, somehow warm, easing my tension, as if we were linked by something invisible; that’s how I felt.

But maybe it had all been a one-sided delusion.

Just then, a voice spoke from the seat behind me.

“You shouldn’t write because you’ll get hurt. Miu’s gotten pretty sappy, huh? I’m disappointed.”

Behind the vivid green upholstery, I saw Ryuto and every hair on my body stood on end.

I’d been hearing his voice over the phone this whole time, but I hadn’t seen him since the Sunday Kotobuki came over to my house.

The sunniness that usually surrounded him and the carefree nature that was impossible to hate had vanished. He gave off an unsettling authority that glinted with danger and chilled me to the bone as he slid into the seat where Miu had so recently been.

From there, he fixed his eyes on me, his gaze that of a vicious, predatory animal.

I couldn’t move, as if his eyes had pinned me to the spot. I couldn’t so much as close my eyes or break his gaze.

“That’d be a problem for me. There’s someone who’s gonna get hurt if you don’t write. Someone who’s gonna be disappointed. Are you gonna turn your back on a reader like that, Konoha? Miu Inoue wouldn’t exist if it weren’t for Tohko Amano. You’re Tohko Amano’s author an’ everythin’.”

“What do you mean, Miu Inoue wouldn’t exist?”

There was a lump in my throat that made it hard to talk.

The corners of Ryuto’s mouth hitched up slightly. That made him look even more threatening.

“Why don’t you ask her yourself? She’s at home right now.”

He saw my hesitation and murmured, “You should go soon. ’Cos I think she got poisoned, and she’s gonna die soon.”

Ole Lukøje has a little brother, you know.

His name is Ole Lukøje, just like his big brother, but he comes to a person only once in their life.

He wears a silver embroidered coat and a black velvet cape, and he rides a horse. Then he takes you onto his horse and tells you a story.

He has only two stories. The first is a story more beautiful than any other, that none in the world could imagine. The second is a disturbing story that makes you shudder.

Every living person taken onto his horse slips into eternal slumber as they listen to one of these stories.

Kana, which of Ole Lukøje's two stories is the supreme story you aspire to, I wonder?

I put the sleeping powder of Ole Lukøje that the little violet bottle held within it into a locked jewelry box. Sometimes I take it out and hold it in the light and gaze at it.

I stare through the translucent violet glass, entranced by the tenderly rolling silver dust. I press it to my flushed cheek, and the cool sensation heals me.

As long as I have this vial, I can change my destiny.

Surely I could even pass through the gates of heaven that tower so high and far away.

To whom does this heart in my hand now belong?

To me? To him? To you, Kana?

When I reached the Sakurai home, I was coated with sweat beneath my jacket and my head was cold and soaked with melted snow.

Obviously he was lying when he said Tohko had been poisoned and was going to die. But I recalled the Amanos who had died in a car accident and the novel Kanako had written, and a string of anxieties bubbled up in my mind. I thought I was going to give myself indigestion. I couldn't focus.

If things were the way Kanako's debut novel said, the old-fashioned, Japanese-style, one-story house was also the house where her own father had strangled

and dismembered her mother, then hung himself beside her.

I felt as if someone was watching me, and a chill I hadn't felt when I'd come here before shook my entire body.

I rang the bell persistently, but there was no answer. The chill seemed to be crawling up my spine, and it continued the entire time I waited.

Was Tohko not here? If she'd gone out, fine, but—but if by some chance she was dying like Ryuto had said— I continued to push the bell, lost in my thoughts.

She wasn't coming!

I threw the sliding front door to one side, and it opened easily since it wasn't locked.

"Hello? It's me, Inoue!"

I shouted loudly, ignoring manners.

"I'm coming in!"

I pulled off my shoes and hurried over the squeaky boards of the hallway. Even though it was the middle of the day, the weather was bad, so it was dim inside and almost painfully cold.

Just then, I heard something crash over.

I pulled open a sliding door and headed intently in the direction from which the sound had come. There I found a girl with long braids lying on her face on the floor.

She was wearing pale violet pajamas! It was Tohko!

"Tohko! It's me! Wake up!"

When I picked her up in my arms, I could feel how shockingly hot her skin was through her thin cotton pajamas.

Her eyes were squeezed shut, and she looked like she was having trouble breathing. She looked like she could die any second!

Had she really been poisoned? Had someone fed it to her? What should I do? They say when someone has food poisoning to make them drink lots of water to dilute whatever is in their stomach, but would that work on Tohko? Should I give

her medicine? Or call an ambulance or something?

As I struggled over these questions, Tohko's eyelashes fluttered and her eyes opened faintly.

"… Konoha."

"You're awake! What kind of poison did she give you?! What should I do?!"

I was shouting in her face, but Tohko spoke in a weak voice, breathing painfully.

"Poison… whaddaya mean…? I just… caught a cold…"

"A cold?!"

My eyes popped open.

"This is just a little cold?!"

"Nngh. It's not a little cold, it's… a huge one."

She had deliberately corrected me, and I got fed up.

"Then why aren't you asleep in bed, like you should be?! Why are you lying on the floor?!"

"Because… the bell kept ringing. It wouldn't stop, so I tried to go to the door, but then my fever made me faint and I tripped on something and I fell over…"

Since I'd been the one pressing the bell so persistently, ignorant of what was happening, my voice choked off.

"I… I'm sorry."

Normally she would have puffed her chest up importantly and said, "You should have known," but today she was lying limply against my shoulder.

"Ack! Tohko!"

Her body was so hot. I had to put her in bed at least.

I circled Tohko's arm around my neck and stood her up, half dragging her along.

There was a carpet laid out on the woven mat flooring in her room. She had pale violet curtains on the window and a huge number of books on the large

bookshelves, and her futon was spread out on top of the carpet. Tohko must have been sleeping there until a few minutes ago. The sheets were tangled up, and the blanket and comforter were thrown to one side.

I laid Tohko down in her bed and pulled the blankets over her.

When I put a hand to her forehead, it was burning hot.

“Do you need medicine, Tohko?”

“… I took some a couple minutes ago.”

What kind of medicine? Would it actually help? Doubts crossed my mind one after another, but I decided not to think about it too deeply for now. I had witnessed plenty enough of irrationality when it came to Tohko over the last two years. Even a goat or a parrot would get better with medicine or a vaccine if you took them to the hospital. It was the same thing.

I went to the bathroom and found a towel and a basin, filled the basin with water, then got ice out of the freezer and made ice water. Then I went back to Tohko’s room.

I dipped the towel in the basin, wrung it out firmly, then rested it on her forehead. With a different towel, I wiped the sweat from Tohko’s face and neck, trying to keep it from coating her skin again.

No matter how I daubed at her, the sweat kept coming. And the towel on her forehead warmed up so quickly that I had to change it several times.

I recalled that when Tohko had returned my scarf to me yesterday morning, my hand had brushed hers. It had been as cold as ice.

How long had she been standing there?

In that freezing cold, alone, waiting for me to come.

Could that be the reason she’d gotten sick?

A long time ago, when I was still a first-year, Tohko had caught a cold and missed a couple days of school.

It was right around the beginning of the third term, I think.

Tohko had been acting strange a little before it happened. Not that she had

swooned from a fever or anything, but the way she talked and acted toward me…

She would look away suddenly, or her face would turn bright red, or she would throw a childish temper tantrum saying, “Don’t come any closer! Don’t come near me!” and start acting standoffish.

“Did I do something wrong?”

*“Just **don’t!** I mean…”*

Never giving a concrete explanation, she would drag her chair a distance away, as if to keep an eye on me. But really, the room was so cramped that distance wasn’t worth much.

“Would you rather I stopped coming?”

“Y-you can’t do that!”

“Then what should I do?”

“This is all your fault.”

*“**What** is?”*

“No!”

Last of all, her face would crumple, and she’d look like she was about to cry. She would spin around on her fold-up chair to turn her back on me and hug her knees to her chest.

What had that really been about?

Around the same time, I ended my period of resistance against Tohko and found myself beginning to head to the book club even when Tohko didn’t come to get me.

It had become a ritual for me after school to listen as Tohko read a book and rambled on about it, and I had even ceased particularly questioning it when she ripped a page out of a book and ate it right in front of me.

In fact, it was somehow reassuring to see Tohko sitting on a fold-up chair with her knees drawn up, happily eating a book.

It was about the time that I’d started to think spending my time after school

with a president who was so childish and meddling and talkative and such a nuisance to everyone around her—it might not be so bad after all.

And yet, the very moment I got used to Tohko, the person who had until then held my hand without a second thought, or peeked down at the story I was working on with her face practically up against mine and nagged me, “Go faster; I’m hungryyy. I won’t make it!” now would turn bright red and whip her hand away if our fingers so much as brushed each other when I handed her a snack. Or if I got within three feet of her, her eyes would bug out and she’d leap back as if she’d seen a monster. It just didn’t make sense.

Things had gone on that way for about three days, I think.

When I went to the clubroom, Tohko wasn’t there yet.

I waited for her, thinking she would come any second, but in the end she never appeared. And although it wasn’t as if I wanted to see her for any particular reason, still I went home feeling somehow let down.

The next day, in return for standing me up, I dashed off a sloppy story while I waited her out, but again Tohko didn’t come.

She’d been acting strange lately. I wondered if something had happened.

Was she skipping out on the club meetings because she didn’t want to see me?

I would have thought there was less than no reason for that to bother me, but it did—and on the fourth day without Tohko showing herself, I went to the second-years’ classes during a break to sneak a look at her.

It wasn’t that I particularly wanted Tohko to show up at club meetings. I’d just come to make sure she was still alive since she’d so abruptly stopped coming, and after coming to see me every day. Maybe she’d gone back to the land of goblins? In which case I would be able to quit the book club, too.

And yet I was nervous about going to a higher year’s classroom, and utterly unable to call into her classroom for her, I was dithering out in the hall when an older girl addressed me.

“Hey, aren’t you Tohko’s kid? If you’re looking for her, she’s been out sick since Monday. I guess she stayed outside a long time that day it snowed. I called her

yesterday and it sounded like she was pretty much okay, so I think she'll be here tomorrow or next week."

Out sick? Did goblins get sick?

And in any case, what was she doing staying out in the snow for so long? There had been a big snowstorm in town the weekend before. She hadn't actually gone out that day, had she? All the trains were stopped. It would have been such an ordeal. That would be so reckless.

Fed up, annoyed—and for some reason also relieved. That day, I knew that Tohko was out, but I went to book club after classes anyway and spent my time alone, thinking about her.

The next day after school, when I opened the door to the clubroom, Tohko was sitting on a fold-up chair with her feet pulled up, reading a book, like always.

Then she saw my face and smiled and—"Hello, Konoha. I'm hungry. Write me somethiiiing."—she wheedled.

"Is it true you got lonely because I was out so long?"

As she leaned forward, tilting the chair along with her, and peeked happily into my face, I asked, "I thought I wasn't supposed to come near you?"

"Oh, it's fine! My cold's all gone now. You won't catch anything."

"No, not your cold, I…"

"Hmm? Hmm? What are you asking about? Forget that and get to work on writing me something. Something suuuper sweet to celebrate your president's recovery."

Tohko had returned to her original, unreserved, unguarded self.

That made me pretty angry and I made a ***spicy*** improv story Tohko's gift for getting over her cold.

Had Tohko been at home in a state like this that time, too?

Breathing roughly, taking medicine all alone, lying in bed for days?

Maybe Ryuto had taken care of her. But what about Kanako?

The house was cold and silent within. The snow must have changed over into

rain. Beyond the violet curtains I heard the faint sound of rainfall.

Tohko looked like she was in pain. Her eyes were closed and she was panting.

As I wiped away the sweat beading on her skin with the wet towel, I felt unbelievably restless. All I could do was pray that Tohko be a little more comfortable.

I'd heard that Tohko was only eight years old when she'd started living in this old house.

How must she have felt losing her parents so suddenly, and both at once?

Had she been constantly ignored by Kanako, a "nonexistent child" in the house, the way Ryuto had said?

When I had that thought, I hurt as if my heart were being wrenched out.

When I was in elementary school and I caught a cold, my mother would gently take my temperature and give me medicine. She would smile and say, "It's all right; you'll be better before you know it," and stroke my head. Then she would scoop up a spoonful of applesauce or homemade jelly and feed it to me.

My room was warm, and my mother was kinder than usual and smelled good. I almost enjoyed getting sick.

After Tohko's parents died, I knew there hadn't been any adults who nursed her that affectionately.

I remembered the words Tohko had gently murmured when she'd come over to my house, gazing tenderly at every single thing in my room.

"What a lovely family."

"So you grew up in this house… surrounded by these kind people."

A gentle smile—as if she was truly happy about that—as transparent as if it had leaked from deep within her heart.

That smile rose in my mind's eye and my chest clenched unbearably tight.

I surveyed Tohko's room with a feeling of chilling desolation.

The wooden desk the color of tea, the chair with burn marks on the legs. An old chest of drawers. So many books lined up neatly on a huge bookcase.

Old Japanese classics, famous books from the turn of the century in Japan, from modern times, from abroad, poetry collections, children's books—I was sure that she had read and reread the old books from that wide variety of genres and ages time and again. They weren't for eating.

Among them I spotted Gide's *Strait Is the Gate.*

It was a hardcover with an old binding.

The holy woman Alissa who left Jerome to move toward God.

The author Kanako Sakurai standing frigidly in the lobby of the hotel.

The Immoral Passage, the novel she'd written—and Arisa, the woman of ice and fire who hadn't balked even from committing murder in order to reach supremacy.

The three women rose in my mind and my throat grew suddenly dry.

I went up to the bookcase, took the book down, and turned back the cover. Inside, I found an inscription written with a fountain pen.

To Tohko

From Dad

There was something feminine about the beautiful, flowing letters.

Had this book been a gift from Tohko's father? I took down several other books and turned back their covers, too.

But there was nothing written in them.

Was it only this book?

If so, then why had Fumiharu written the message *"To Tohko"* in this of all books?

Did it have something to do with how Kanako had mingled the main character of *The Immoral Passage* with *Strait Is the Gate*'s Alissa?

In fact, in *The Immoral Passage*, the character Haru, who seemed to have been modeled on Fumiharu, tells Arisa, "You're like Alissa seeking the love of heaven."

Maybe that was something Fumiharu had actually said to Kanako.

I turned through the pages.

Deeply moved by the words of a priest in church to “enter in by the narrow gate,” Jerome prays fervently to go through the gate with Alissa.

“The two of us will don white costumes as recited in Revelations, then take hold of one another’s hands and move forward, focused on the same goal…”

For Jerome, the narrow gate was also the gate that led to Alissa. He had no doubt that the two of them could walk the path that led to God together.

What had Fumiharu thought about Kanako?

Had they been linked by a powerful bond, each of them aspiring to a single thing like Arisa and Haru from *The Immoral Passage*?

Mr. Sasaki had said that Kanako’s relationship with Fumiharu had been a chaste union.

And that she must have felt competitive toward his wife, Yui, that she would deliberately call Fumiharu away on his days off…

What had Juliette—had Yui—who was married to Jerome thought of that?

My hand froze.

A photo had been slipped between the books.

It looked like it had been taken at a zoo. A man with an intelligent, gentle cast to his face was smiling, holding a girl with braids in his arms. The girl looked like she was having fun, too. Beside them a woman with loose waves in her long, shiny hair was smiling. She was petite, cute, and seemed somewhat ethereal.

It had to be Fumiharu and Yui—and Tohko. Yui’s smile looked exactly like Tohko’s.

And Fumiharu’s clear gaze resembled the clear eyes Tohko sometimes had when she wore an intelligent expression.

I felt my throat closing up at the sight of this family who looked truly happy and seemed to be truly close.

Behind me, Tohko panted painfully.

I closed the book and returned it to the shelf, then wrung out the towel that

had been on her forehead and wiped off her sweat. The ice in the basin had all melted into water.

I could hear nothing but the gentle sound of falling rain and the breath coming out of Tohko.

My sense of time grew vague.

But it ought to be evening soon.

When would everyone be coming home…?

Ryuto might not come home with things the way they were, although he might be watching how things were going from somewhere.

According to what Mr. Sasaki had told me, Kanako had other places where she worked, so she might be there, writing. What time did she ordinarily come home? Or did she not come back for several days at a time?

I opened my cell phone and found a message from Kotobuki.

She was worried about why I'd left so suddenly, whether I was feeling all right, whether my relative had taken a turn for the worse. I could tell that she sensed something unnatural in my behavior and was hesitant to ask about it, even though she wanted to. It was only natural she'd find it suspicious when I'd left the classroom the way I did.

My stomach hurt, like it was twisting into knots.

My sense of guilt over the unforgivable things I was doing to Kotobuki cut into me.

I'm sorry. Don't worry about me.

That was all I sent her.

I wondered how many "sorrys" this made now and guilt dug at my chest even more. Even though I knew exactly how pointless it was to tell her not to worry.

I also sent my mom a text that I might be home late, so I didn't need dinner.

I shut my phone, feeling a heavy, black lump lodged in my stomach.

I changed the towel on Tohko's forehead and wiped away her sweat again after that.

It was nearly eight o'clock at night when Tohko woke up.

Her fever hadn't gone down, and I was sure she must have been in pain. She looked at me with bleary eyes, taking short, panting breaths.

"… What time is it, Konoha?"

"About four o'clock."

"Nuh-uh… it's dark outside."

"Does it matter what time it is? Do you want to take some medicine? Where is it?"

"Under my blanket…"

"Your blanket?"

I pushed back her comforter and found a silver packet of cold medicine.

"I'll bring you some water. You should have something to eat before you take… what the?"

A familiar-looking book was poking out from under her bed.

I tugged it out and checked the title, and it was, as I'd suspected, the copy of *Alt Heidelberg* she'd made me buy when we went to Maki's estate over the summer. She'd told me with a syrupy look on her face that it was the German version of *Roman Holiday*, that it's the poignant romance of a crown prince and a girl from a boardinghouse.

She hadn't finished it yet…

But the other two books, *Tonio Kröger* and *Undine*, had disappeared into her stomach in an instant.

When I flipped through it, there were signs that it had been exhaustively read several times, and a third of the pages had been torn out.

"Do you want this for dinner, Tohko?"

I started tearing a page out when—"No!"—Tohko stopped me with a desperate voice.

"Not that book."

She turned her face toward me, and the sight of her murmuring with teary eyes made my heart skip a beat.

“Why not?”

“If I eat it… I won’t have it anymore… *Alt Heidelberg* is all I have left. It’s the only one. So I *can’t* eat it…”

Her voice croaked.

Tohko feebly lifted herself up, then snatched the book from me and hugged it to her chest. She’d moved so suddenly, she swooned again.

I hurried to catch her, then laid her down in the bed.

Tohko curled up, hugging *Alt Heidelberg* tightly.

My heart hurt at the childish gesture.

“Then what book do you want? Or should I make you regular food? I know how to make soup.”

I was sure Tohko was in a haze from her fever.

Still hugging the book, she gazed up at me; then her face crumpled and she whispered in a voice on the verge of tears, “I want…”

“Hmm?”

“I want my mom’s food…”

Like a little child.

Her eyes watering powerlessly.

Her voice wavering, as if she was giving voice to a wish she’d long held in her heart.

“My mom was a book girl just like me.”

“She would always write my dad and me delicious meals.”

The happy family I’d seen in the photo.

The little girl, her kind-looking father, and her mother.

I remembered Tohko telling me that she and her father had both loved the

stories her mother wrote for them, and my heart swelled until it felt like it would burst.

After her mother passed away, had Tohko thought again and again about the food she used to write? Had she wished that she could eat her mother's food?

Even though she would have known better than anyone that it was impossible…

Tohko's face pinched and she looked closer to tears than ever. She hid her face with her book and bent her head, bit down on her lip, and trembled.

"… Why did you come here, Konoha?"

She sounded like she was attacking me.

"I…"

"I gave you back your scarf… and everything. I said good-bye… I thought… as long as I didn't eat the rest of *Alt Heidelberg*… So why… why are you in my room?"

I was silent.

"You're so mean, Konoha…"

Tohko turned her back on me.

I hadn't anticipated the words she would fire at me at a time like this.

I felt an ache as if something were chafing against my heart, grating against it, and I couldn't say anything.

So instead I opened my bag and took out my math notebook. I scribbled a little story out on the white page with a mechanical pencil.

"School lunch," "snack," and "mother"—

With the stories I'd heard of Tohko's mother hovering in my mind—the little girl with the braids and the cute, ethereal woman beside her, both with their happy smiles—I scribbled down the words.

When the page was full, I went to the next. When that was full, I went to the next.

I wrote a two-and-a-half-page story, which I read aloud at Tohko's side.

The way Tohko had read Yuri's diary at my side over the summer.

Like a story read by a mother before her child falls asleep—

The girl had just started elementary school and didn't like school lunches. Even when everyone else was done eating, she sat alone, staring at her plate.

Scolded by her teacher and teased by her classmates, the girl pleads with her mother, crying, "I don't want to go to school.

"I'm the only one who can't eat the lunch they give us."

The mother speaks to the girl kindly.

"Are you sure you can't eat it? You only have to eat a little bit, so why not try it and see how it tastes? If you do, then I'll make you a delicious snack as a reward."

The next day, the girl takes a tiny bite of a carrot in her stew, then holds her breath and swallows it.

When she announces that, her mother hugs the girl and lets her eat a sweet, homemade treat.

The next day and the next after that, little by little, the girl is able to eat the school lunches.

Each time she does, her mother hugs her, warmly tells her, "Good job, you're trying so hard," and then makes her a treat.

And so finally, the girl finishes an entire school lunch, smiles, and says it tasted great.

I can't wait to tell my mom, she thinks… *I bet today's treat will be the sweetest one of all.*

With her back still turned on me, Tohko seemed to be hanging on my story.

In a quiet voice… slowly, one word at a time… I continued reading the clumsy story I'd written.

Hoping that it would touch Tohko's heart just a little, that it would reawaken the taste of her mother's stories in her heart.

That it would communicate itself to Tohko's heart, to her tongue.

Filled with that wish.

But even after I read the last words, Tohko didn't turn around.

I tore off a small piece of the notebook paper, then stretched out my hand and brought it to Tohko's mouth.

"You can stay that way as long as you eat."

There was a silence in which she seemed to be holding her breath; then her soft lips touched my fingertips.

Flp, mnch… the secretive sound of her chewing on paper…

Tohko rolled onto her back. With a hesitant face that looked like she was sobbing—"… more," she murmured.

"Here you go."

I nodded with a smile, then tore off pieces and brought them to Tohko's lips.

Like a baby bird being fed by its mother, Tohko ate the scraps of the story out of my hand.

Occasionally her lips or tongue would touch my fingers.

When they did, my fingertips felt hot.

When her teeth hit my fingers, I warned her, "Please don't bite."

Embarrassed, she apologized. "… I'm sorry."

After that, she took the paper timidly in her lips, and staring at me with teary eyes, her jaw bobbed as she chewed.

When I slipped the last scrap in through her parted lips, Tohko gulped it down, and then her face turned sad.

"Let's get you your medicine. I'll bring some water."

"… Konoha."

I had stood up and was about to go to the kitchen when Tohko stopped me.

I turned back around, and with an expression still melancholy, she murmured,

“Thank you. It was… very sweet. It tasted nice.”

I smiled.

“I’m glad.”

Tohko watched me, her eyes near to bawling.

I spent that entire night at Tohko’s side.

I texted my mom to tell her I was staying the night at Ryuto’s house. Her reply asked, Are you sure it’s not an imposition? I’d like to thank them. Can you send me their name and number? but I didn’t respond to that.

Tohko slept soundly, so maybe the medicine was working.

I took *Strait Is the Gate* down from the bookcase and spent the whole night reading it.

“I only want you to remember that I loved you more than any other…”

“I was thinking that the day will come when your child will wear this tiny crucifix you so loved about her neck, in memory of me. Without ever knowing who it came from…”

“And I wonder whether you will give her… my name…”

Alissa says that she wants Jerome to have the amethyst crucifix, a token of their memories together.

She says that if Jerome ever gets married and has a daughter, she wants him to pass it on to her. That she wants him to name the child Alissa.

Filled with the purity of an angel.

Jerome becomes angry, asking why she’s thinking about him marrying another woman and having children, and Alissa hugs him and begs him to change his mind.

But even as Alissa keeps her sorrow hidden, she coolly declares:

“Oh, don’t let’s dredge up the past.

“The page has already been turned.”

“Good-bye, beloved friend. Now—I begin ‘that which is superior.’ ”

What was the thing Alissa believed was superior even to love?

What sort of life did Juliette’s daughter, who received Alissa’s name, go on to lead?

I was hesitating over whether or not to call Fumiharu because I thought he might be with you.

Unable to sleep, I sat in bed with the little violet bottle Takumi had given me resting on my palm. I was staring at it when Tohko came in, rubbing her eyes, from the room next to mine where she’d been sleeping.

“Mommy… I want something to eat.”

“It’s not time to eat yet; you know that. Let’s get you back in bed.”

“Mmm… what’s that, Mommy?”

I realized Tohko was looking at the bottle and my heart skipped.

“This is the sleeping powder of Ole Lukøje. But not the big brother. This is the little brother’s. You know the story of Ole Lukøje, don’t you, Tohko? That the little Ole Lukøje is Death who rides on a horse. So if you touch even a little bit of this powder, he’ll make you get on his horse and take you away to the land of dreams, and you won’t be able to come back. So you absolutely cannot touch this, Tohko.”

Tohko had been trying to touch the heart-shaped bottle, but she quickly pulled her hand back.

She looked like she was half-asleep, so I’m sure she’ll forget all about this bottle in the morning.

Once I took her to bed and kissed her on her cheeks and her eyelids, Tohko fell right asleep.

Beside her, Ryu was snoring.

The two of them are like angels.

I’m truly glad I have Tohko. I can’t say how happy I am.

I’ll hide the key to my jewelry box in the very top drawer. A child won’t be able to reach it there.

Chapter 7—The Girl with the Violet Barrette

The next morning, when blinding light streamed through the gap in the curtains, Tohko woke up.

“You still have a fever. I wrote a little story for your breakfast, so have that, take your medicine, and take things easy.”

As I spoke, I put a hand to her forehead to check her temperature, which made Tohko’s cheeks flush slightly.

“… Did you stay the night, Konoha?”

“I couldn’t leave someone that sick by themselves, could I?”

Tohko looked like there was something she wanted to say, but she seemed strangely unable to find the words. After dropping her eyes and pressing her lips together or half opening them, she whispered simply, “… Thank you.”

“Wh-what’s done is done. Also, if you can move, you should change clothes. You sweated a lot.”

“Mmr… I will,” she answered in embarrassment, then shuffled to get up. She took a change of clothes out of a drawer, and then, hugging them in her arms, she staggered out of the room.

“Are you all right?”

I started to lend a hand, but her head bowed as her cheeks flushed again.

“I’m fine.”

After that, changed into new light blue pajamas and with neatly rebraided hair, Tohko sat down in her bed, then tore up the breakfast I’d written and ate it on her own.

"… It tastes great. It's warm and… gentle, and… it's like a cabbage, bacon, and mushroom soup," she whispered, smiling slightly. "And the story you wrote me yesterday was very sweet, like rice porridge boiled in milk… It was delicious. It tasted like my mother's."

"I want my mom's food…"

Pain shot through my chest.

Did Tohko remember her tearful plea?

Her placid gaze turned melancholy.

As she nibbled appreciatively on my story, Tohko murmured tenderly, "My mom's food was sweet and warm, and even if I was sad about something, I could forget about it when I ate her food. It was like she cast a spell on it. She always used to tell me that she wanted to write a story like manna."

"Manna?"

"It's a kind of food mentioned in the Bible, in the story of Moses. His people were hungry and wandering through the wilderness, and God rained pure white manna down on them. It was as thin as a layer of frost and as sweet as honey. And God kept showering His people with manna until they reached the promised land of Canaan."

A gentle light touched her clear eyes.

As if she were picturing the scene in her mind's eye…

Heavenly nourishment raining down on a wasteland.

God's infinite, pure, warm manna—His love.

"A story of manna that fills an empty stomach… It was my mother's dream… to write a story like that someday."

I'd heard that Tohko's mother wanted to be an author.

She had probably whispered again and again to her young daughter in a kind voice.

"I want to write a story like manna someday."

Tohko had been telling me about it so excitedly, but her eyes dropped and she

fell abruptly silent.

The story like manna would never be written now… She must have remembered that.

“It was very good,” she murmured quietly.

“Take your medicine, too, okay?”

“I will.”

“You should sleep a little more.”

“What are you going to do?”

Tohko looked at me anxiously.

“I’ll be here until you wake up.”

“What about school?”

“I already told the teacher I was going to be out.”

“… You didn’t sleep last night, did you?”

“I’m not sleepy. Don’t worry about me. You just take it easy and get better soon. You still have the test for your top school left, right?”

Tohko’s eyes looked tearful and a little troubled. Then she said in spurts, “There’s a futon in the closet… you can use it if you get sleepy. And you can eat whatever’s in the kitchen.” Then she went back to sleep.

Which reminded me, I hadn’t had anything to eat since yesterday. I hadn’t been hungry at all, so I’d forgotten. I was resistant to rooting through someone else’s kitchen, but when I actually went there and opened the fridge, it was remarkably barren.

There was one egg left, still in the pack, whose expiration date was blurred. Other than that, there was only cheese, salami, mayonnaise, mineral water, and canned beer.

If Tohko ate books, then what kind of eating habits did Ryuto and Kanako have?

I glanced down and saw some instant ramen, some instant fried noodles, and a

huge number of disposable chopsticks in a cardboard box.

I helped myself to a cup of miso-flavored ramen, filled it with hot water, then ate it.

As soon as my stomach was full, I was assaulted by drowsiness. My eyelids felt like they were dropping, but I fought it off and headed back to Tohko's room. Her eyes were still closed, and she was clinging tightly to the half-eaten copy of *Alt Heidelberg* in one hand.

Something burned inside my nose.

Tohko shivered with cold. Her arm was poking out from under the comforter, still clinging to the book, so I knelt down and gently slipped it back under the blankets.

Maybe… I should put one more blanket on her.

With that thought, I started to open the closet when a chill suddenly went down my back.

I'd remembered the scene from Kanako's novel.

After the couple's funeral, she'd gone to their empty apartment and opened the closet, where she found the rotting body of a baby.

What was I thinking?!

That was fiction. Tohko was alive, sleeping behind me right now.

And yet the chills wouldn't stop, as if I had been caught in a cold spot; my throat grew dry, and my hand twitched in front of the sliding door.

Imagining there was something horrible that I shouldn't see on the other side of the thin, faded paper door, that as soon as I opened the door it would come out and attack me… Imagining a pale hand would reach out of the muddy darkness, grab my arm, and drag me in…

Get a grip. Why are you letting your paranoia get to you?

I held my breath, focused my eyes, and pulled the closet door open.

Cool air whooshed out and my heart quailed, my skin prickling instantly.

The top shelf was piled with blankets and the futon. Boxes full of books were

packed off to one side of those and on the lower shelves.

It was a totally ordinary closet.

And yet the sensation, stroking electrically inside my chest, didn't go away. I tried to just pull out a blanket and close the door as fast as I could.

As it happened, one corner of the blanket caught under some boxes beside it, and when I pulled on it, the boxes came crashing down.

"Ack!"

I hurried to push them back with my hands, but I couldn't manage to catch the topmost box and it scattered its contents over the floor.

I looked back over my shoulder in a panic, but Tohko was still asleep. She hadn't noticed.

I let out a sigh and set the blanket on the floor, then started picking up everything that had fallen.

There were things like a drawing of her parents that Tohko must have made when she was little, erasers shaped like animals, a violet marble, and a musical telegram for her birthday that had been sent from a hospital. All of them seemed to be mementos.

There was also a photo album.

It had fallen open on the floor. When I picked it up and started to close it, my eyes caught a girl with braids wearing a sailor uniform.

She… must have been in middle school. The girl was smiling happily in front of an art museum surrounded by woods. A travel thermos hung across the front of her sailor suit, and she carried a bunch of bags from a souvenir shop in her arms. She had a hair accessory in the shape of a violet over her ear.

Was this Yui?

Beside her stood a girl with a spare frame. With cold, doll-like eyes, a blue glass pendant hung over her chest, her black hair cut evenly above her shoulders—Could this be Kanako…?

I turned to other pages.

Almost all of them were plastered with pictures of the two young girls.

An old school building, a soccer net, chin-up bars, cherry trees. The girls existed against that backdrop that could be found anywhere, a gymnasium, in sailor uniforms, P.E. uniforms, sweat suits. In every one of the pictures, the girl with the braids was smiling as if she couldn't help being happy. In contrast, the other girl's expression was always hard and cold.

And yet the girl with the braids didn't seem bothered by that fact in the slightest. She wound her arm through her friend's and wore a smile like a flower opening.

As I continued paging through the album, I found pictures showing the two of them grown up slightly and wearing two different uniforms.

The girl with the braids wore a blazer with a checked, pleated skirt and socks, and the girl with the cold eyes wore a gray dress with a bolero jacket and black tights.

Apparently they'd still gotten together all the time, even after they moved on to separate schools.

The girl with the braids was as sunny as ever, the other girl dark and cold.

Turning further, I found a college campus, a cramped room that looked like a clubroom, and the two girls as college students.

Just as you'd expect, the one girl didn't have braids now but instead hair that cascaded past her shoulders in loose waves; but her smile hadn't changed. Similar to how the girl beside her had grown up to be more and more beautiful while her eyes held the same frigidity of her girlhood.

On the last page, there was a photo of Yui smiling, wearing a pure white wedding dress and handing her bouquet to Kanako, who wore a blue dress.

Kanako's face was a blank, not even smiling. I wondered if royal blue was Kanako's favorite color. She'd been wearing a dress this color at the party, too…

"Kanako and Tohko's mother, Yui, were dear friends."

Mr. Sasaki's words surfaced as a troubled, bitter expression came over my face.

Had the two of them truly been best friends? Certainly Yui was always at Kanako's side, but—it felt off. Because there wasn't even one photo where Kanako was smiling— I started to close the album when I noticed a thin sheet of paper between the last page and the cover and that something was stuck in underneath it.

It was several sheets of lined paper that looked like a letter.

My eyes ran over them unsuspectingly and I felt a shock.

"I wonder if you think things would be better if I were dead."

What the—this was…!

I gazed at the candid words written in beautifully prim handwriting, holding my breath. Other words chained together, sharp as arrows.

> When I debuted, you berated me mercilessly. That I'd used you to get close to him. That I'd used my body to seduce him into reading my book. That it was a betrayal to write a book without telling you.
>
> That ugliness is what you're really like.
>
> And yet in front of him, you want to look like you're a good little girl. Pretending to be worried about me. You're a truly despicable person. How dare you suggest that I might get hurt if that book gets published. Even though in your heart you were jealous and bitter and couldn't stand the fact that I was publishing. You wanted to do whatever you could to beat me down.

My throat felt dry and sweat beaded on my forehead.

Was this… a letter Kanako had sent Yui? But this wasn't the kind of thing you'd send to a dear friend.

> You always change your stories around to suit yourself.
>
> You've been that way since middle school. You didn't care that you were bothering me when you latched on to me and played it up to everyone as if we were best friends. The truth was that you just wanted to bathe yourself in the sense of superiority you got from being the only one who could talk freely to the girl who was always alone.

It was the same when we were in high school, when my parents died.

I didn't ask you to, but you came to the cremation. Did you think I didn't notice that the whole time you were hugging me and crying, your lips were curved with joy? You were drunk on giving your grieving friend courage even then.

It's the same now.

While you act gentle, like some holy mother, you're always afraid that I might steal your husband from you and you turn spiteful eyes on me from the shadows, making blatant calls to his office or trying to keep him at home using your child as an excuse. You're so desperate it makes me laugh.

"I'm his author."

"Fumiharu told me he wants me to be his author. Just his."

"I can't put out books like you do, Kanako, but I'm happy anyway."

You talked endlessly, as if to flaunt your happiness. You sent me postcards with family pictures on them. But you need to take a good look at reality.

You never had talent.

The stories you wrote were just like the dreams Ole Lukøje gave to children with his painted umbrella. Insubstantial and ambiguous, leaving no impression, they disappear the moment morning comes.

He understood that and that's why he wouldn't let you debut.

It's clear to anyone who looks that Fumiharu Amano's author isn't you; it's me. He's eaten in front of me. You're not the only one who's special. His author is me.

You could never be an author. Your stories are inane, dreamy fantasies.

So you told me that you have poison.

"What would it do to Fumiharu if I poisoned myself? Do you think it

would kill him?”

What were you trying to ask me? Was that supposed to be a threat?

I know where you’re hiding the poison, you know. You always put the things you care about there. And when I opened it up to see, it was exactly as I’d guessed.

Once you’ve killed him, are you going to kill me, too? Are you going to poison my food with a smile on your face?

It’s pointless. I won’t die. I’m going to survive. I’m not stupid enough to get killed by you.

I will never forgive you or your daughter for spoiling the “supremacy” he and I were going to share.

By the time I’d finished reading, my body and fingertips were completely frozen.

My head throbbed and I couldn’t tear my eyes from the page. The date written at the very end was three days before the Amanos would die.

Kanako had written a letter berating Yui. Yui had turned a jealous gaze on Kanako. Both those facts brought on a shock that stabbed into my chest. But what was even more shocking was that Kanako had mentioned that Yui had poison.

In *The Immoral Passage*, it was Arisa who had poisoned the food.

But if Yui was the one who’d actually possessed the poison—

Had Kanako found it, like it said in her letter, and killed Yui and her husband before Yui could do it? Or… had Yui…?

The line “What would it do to Fumiharu if I poisoned myself?” rose up vividly in my mind. A shiver went up my spine and it became even harder to breathe.

The police hadn’t been able to uncover any evidence that Kanako had poisoned the Amanos. Kanako *hadn’t* poisoned them. In which case, *Yui must have*.

When Kanako guessed where Yui was hiding the poison, if Yui had felt cornered

and had poisoned her and her husband's food— If she had chosen to die together rather than hand her husband over to Kanako— The way Yui smiled in the photos, she definitely didn't seem like the type of person who would do something like that. She seemed like a cute, composed, generous person. But if Yui had actually held dark sentiments toward Kanako, like it said in the letter— but it couldn't be possible!

My hands were shaking.

I put the letter back in the album, then put the album back into the box and shut it in the closet. Even after I slid the door closed, the chills wouldn't stop.

I spread the blanket over Tohko, then huddled in a ball in a corner of her room, pulled my jacket over my head, and shut my eyes tightly.

I wanted to forget everything from the letter I'd just seen.

Just moments ago I'd been unspeakably sleepy, but now my heart was racing, my brain was aching and on fire. How could I possibly sleep?!

Had Yui poisoned them?

Tohko was breathing peacefully in her sleep. What had Tohko hoped to accomplish by keeping that letter?

The darkness closed in on me leadenly. My throat ached.

Don't waste time thinking about it. You have to sleep now.

I chanted, *Sleep, sleep!* as if it were a spell to drive away my demons, and finally I fell into a stinging slumber.

I must have been tired. When I woke up, it was after four in the afternoon.

Before I'd gone to sleep, I hadn't had more than my jacket around me, but now I was wrapped up in a heavy quilt. Tohko must have done that.

When I twisted around and looked toward where Tohko had been sleeping, she was sitting up in bed with her knees drawn up to her chest under the blankets, reading *Alt Heidelberg.*

She noticed I was awake and her eyes softened and she smiled.

"Thank you, Konoha. I'm much better now."

The smile I'd seen on Yui's face in the photos overlaid itself on Tohko's and my blood froze.

To hide it, I stood up and put a hand on Tohko's forehead.

"You still have a fever. You need to rest."

I thought if I slept I'd be able to forget. But it hadn't worked. I couldn't forget a letter like that.

Tohko giggled, looking like Yui again.

"… You're like a mom, Konoha."

I flinched and with a rattling, dry voice I asked, "Your mom… and Ryuto's mom… were friends, right?"

Tohko nodded, looking pleased.

"Yup. They were in the same class in their second year of middle school, and that's how they started talking. I heard a bunch of stories about Aunt Kanako from my mom. When she started telling them, she couldn't stop. She was incredibly proud of Aunt Kanako. She really liked her."

A black whirlpool grew inside my chest.

Had Yui truly "really liked" Kanako? Hadn't her true feelings been something different?

Tohko went on telling me about them with an openhearted smile.

"I like Aunt Kanako, too. She looks unfriendly, but she's actually a nice person. She let me live here. She's really a good person."

Beaming though she was, when she repeated, "She's… a good person," so often, it seemed like she was trying to force herself to believe it.

The pitch-black whirlpool grew steadily larger as it swirled around.

"Shouldn't you have let Kanako know you were so sick?"

Tohko shook her head, keeping her smile in place.

"If I told her, she would worry so much. I don't want to worry her or make her sad. She doesn't say what she's thinking, so I always try to smile in front of her."

Wasn't there something messed up about that? It was bizarre to live in the same house and not be able to tell someone that you're sick.

The words got as far as my throat before they got caught.

But the look on Tohko's face and her tone of voice were sunny—not the slightest cloud obscured them—and I couldn't help but stay silent.

After that, Tohko got a sad look on her face and murmured haltingly, "I wish… my mother were alive… to write me stories… If she were…"

I was just about to ask her another question, but she was already smiling brightly.

"I'm hungry, Konoha. Let's get something to eat."

Soon after, I was having a cup of instant noodles. Tohko was having a short story collection by Kunikida Doppo.

" 'Sorrows of Youth'—I love this short story. Where the man who narrates it exchanges words only once with an unhappy woman he meets in his youth, and then they part ways—that's all that happens in the brief space of the story, but… it's pure… and poignant… like plain soup stock with clams and parsley in it, flavored with soy sauce… redolent of a beachside at night…"

I recalled a time when Tohko and I had read a Kunikida short story together and my heart filled with melancholy.

"In fact, this story has an incredibly beautiful opening line. *'If the joys of youth are a poem, the sorrows of youth must be, as well.' "*

Just like that other time, Tohko smiled and asked, "Isn't that wonderful?"

"… Yeah."

Was the pain I felt now, that threatened to tear open my heart, the sorrow of youth? Would it fade when I became an adult?

Or would it never stop bleeding? Would I still hate someone and curse their name even after I was an adult, like in that letter from Kanako?

After we'd finished our late lunch—"I'm fine now, Konoha. Go home."—Tohko told me kindly, and so I went back home.

“You don’t have to walk me out. You should go back to bed.”

“I’ll just see you to the front door. It’s fine. I have to lock the door anyway.”

“It wasn’t locked when I came over.”

“What? That’s odd…”

As we chatted like always, my heart ached impossibly and a sense of poignancy welled up inside me.

When would we see each other next?

We might not ever again.

I hunkered down at the front door, sluggishly tying my shoelaces, when the door slid open and a woman wearing a bright blue coat came in.

I gasped in surprise.

She knit her brows as well.

This was the woman who had written the novel. The one where she poisoned a couple she was friends with and strangled their daughter— The letter stuck in the photo album, the things Ryuto had told me, and Tohko’s words poured through my mind in a stream and a seething rage bubbled up in me—I glared at her instinctively.

She had her cold, beautiful eyes fixed fully on me, too.

It was Tohko’s voice that shattered the tense atmosphere.

“Welcome home, Aunt Kanako!”

She greeted her with a brilliant smile, as if she was ecstatic beyond words.

“Konoha came to see how I was doing. But I just caught a little cold, and I was totally fine. Are you done with work, Aunt Kanako? Oh, a package came for you from the publisher’s. I put it in the living room, so you can take a look at it. Oh, and Aunt Kanako—”

Her face icy and expressionless, Kanako removed her slender high heels and came into the house, passing right by me.

She went right past Tohko, who was still babbling, too, then slid open a door

and disappeared into another room.

The door closed with a sharp *clack*.

Tohko was still smiling.

“She hasn’t been able to come home for so long because of work. She looks tired. Don’t let it bother you, Konoha.”

I looked at Tohko with thoughts that chilled the blood in my heart.

“Thank you so much, though, for taking care of me today and yesterday. I’ll see you, Konoha.”

Tohko waved at me happily, to which I was finally able to wring out my voice, “… Take care.” Then I left through the front door.

Why did Tohko have to smile like that?!

A cold wind blew outside.

As I moved through the yard, growing dim as the sun set, toward the front gate, I bit back a directionless anger.

Had she spent her entire life like that? Being ignored?

So then how could she say Kanako was “a good person”?!

I couldn’t help getting so upset, but I hadn’t been able to say anything to Tohko or to Kanako. I had just turned my back on the house where they lived and left— I mean, I didn’t have the right.

I couldn’t understand Tohko’s feelings, or Kanako’s—not me, who wasn’t capable of living as an author— My chest felt like it would snap with pain.

When I noticed Ryuto standing in front of the persimmon tree right next to the gate, my heart stopped.

“Did you run into Kanako?”

His voice was low.

In his grimly tense face, his eyes alone glinted sharply.

“Those two… are always like that. Tohko says somethin’ and Kanako ignores her. It’s been that way ever since… Tohko came to stay at our house. I can’t

stand to watch it."

He bit down on his lip in apparent pain, then went on.

"Back when Tohko was livin' with her family, she'd start bawlin' at the littlest things. She'd come home from school cryin' and Aunt Yui would make her feel better. But she'd act tough in front of me and pout and say, 'I wasn't crying!' Her eyes were red, though, so it was pretty obvious.

"I think she's just got too strong of an imagination, 'cos she was real shy around people, and she'd get scared and go hide when someone she didn't know came over. And she hated ghosts and scary stories, too. But ever since Tohko came to our house, I never once saw her cry 'cos she was sad. And she'll go up to anyone and talk to them now. She might be scared to go into a house where someone got dismembered, but she won't admit it. Plus, she *always* smiles for Kanako. Do you know why that is?"

Ryuto's eyes, his voice, were colored by fiery anger and pain.

"Tohko tried to become Aunt Yui."

To become Yui?!

The smile that was so identical to Tohko's rose again in my mind.

Had Tohko kept smiling by constantly recalling the image of her dead mother?

Had she been doing her best to act cheerful so that her spirit wouldn't break? Why? Why go that far?

"But no matter how hard she tries to get close to her aunt, there's one thing Tohko can't do."

Ryuto fixed his eyes on me.

"And that's write Aunt Yui's stories. That's the one thing only the real Aunt Yui could do."

With his penetrating gaze turned on me, a chill went down my spine.

What—?

What was he trying to say?

"It's impossible—I would have thought," Ryuto stated flatly. "But *she found*

you. You, who has the capacity to complete the story Aunt Yui could never write."

Kanako had told me, *"I know someone who writes novels very similar to yours,"* and Tohko had said her mother always talked about wanting to write "a story like manna." Recalling the way she had told me, on the verge of tears, *"I want my mom's food…,"* my brain boiled and my body shook.

So Tohko was hoping I would write the novel her mother should have written! That's what she'd been praying I would write!

"If you wrote it, it would save us all… that's what we thought… me and Tohko both."

I groaned.

"It's not possible! I'm not Tohko's mother, am I?! I'm a different person. Even if you expect that from me, I can't do anything about it!"

"But all we're doin' right now is waitin' for destruction."

Such a stormy expression came over Ryuto's face that it made me shudder.

"I know that… for a fact.

"Everyone's carryin' a time bomb inside their hearts and they're walkin' on a tightrope right up until they can't anymore. Exactly like they did nine years ago. Things aren't gonna settle down unless someone disappears, just like back then."

The darkness increased its hold and loomed over me. Picked out by the faint light of the moon, a brutal smile came over Ryuto's face.

"*I know that*… 'cos I'm the reincarnation of Takumi Suwa."

I felt a jolt.

What was with Ryuto? He wasn't acting normal.

"Do you know who that is? Takumi Suwa? He was a blow-off womanizer, and he was my dad. But when I was still inside Kanako's belly, he jumped into a road and died. I'm his reincarnation."

My voice was thick with fear.

“That’s—”

“Crazy? But I have memories from my previous life. How Kanako rejected me, her cold looks, and the moment I jumped at the cars, and how Kanako didn’t come to the hospital, and how I gave that nice lady Yui the poison—I remember *all* of it.”

A chill shot through my spine.

Did he say he *gave* her the poison?!

“That’s right, *I* gave Yui the poison. It was in a little violet-colored bottle the shape of a heart. ’Cos she was always nice to me and I really liked her. I couldn’t just watch her sufferin’. I wanted to help her go to sleep peacefully…”

I stood frozen as Ryuto continued his incredible story, the smile still on his face.

“Yui’s hands were so pale—they were refined and soft and smooth as a child’s. When I pressed the violet heart into her hands, Yui smiled. To thank me. She was happy. And then she used it. After all, the only way you can hold on to the person you love forever is to either kill yourself or kill them, right?”

A knifelike wind stabbed at my face and throat.

The things Ryuto had always said—

That he was looking for someone who would love him enough to kill him.

That he wanted to be loved and despised by a woman like that.

Because hatred lasted longer than love—

So Yui really *had* been the one who poisoned them!

I couldn’t tell where the boundary between reality and deceit lay, and I braced my feet desperately against the sense that I was being dragged into a dysfunctional space.

“You’re just imagining that! How would Takumi ever know whether or not Kanako came to the hospital when he was dying?”

“That’s true. But I’ve seen it a bunch of times in my dreams. I see myself dyin’ alone in the hospital… as if my soul had slipped out of my body and I was lookin’

down from the ceilin'. I remember everythin' from that moment—the panic, the frustration, the despair, the love. I took a perfect image of that stuff with me when I got reborn from Kanako's belly. I know it's so that we don't repeat the same tragedy again."

Ryuto stared at me with a penetrating look, then spoke in a powerful tone of voice.

"Please write, Konoha. Before I give Tohko Ole Lukøje's little violet bottle. You're the only one who can save us."

He said it almost like it was a curse.

"No way. I can't write."

I spat the words out pointedly, and then I started running. I went through the gate and ran as hard as I could, almost falling over, down the frigid night-bound road.

No way!

No way!

No way!

A story like the downy white manna God rained down on his people.

Like sustenance from heaven, shining nobly.

I wasn't capable of writing a novel like that.

I couldn't do something as important as save someone by writing.

It hurt to breathe! My head hurt as if I'd been punched. My throat was searing hot, and it felt like my beating heart would shred itself!

Why did I have to write?!

Why were they forcing that role on me?!

"Please write, Konoha."

"I wish… my mother were alive… to write me stories."

"You've gotta write, Konoha."

"Konoha… you should write a novel someday."

“You’re the only one who can save us.”

“When you write your novel, let me read it, okay?”

The voices crashed around in my head like a storm. The sharp winter wind cut into my body.

“You could never be an author.”

“Readers betray authors.”

“You should write a novel.”

“You should someday, Konoha…”

No way! Stop it! I’m not an author! I’m not!

I don’t even want to write novels anymore!

Exhausted from running, exhausted from thinking, feeling several times that I wanted to just collapse on the ground, I finally reached the front of my house when— I spotted something white at the edge of the tile-capped wall.

It was a scarf.

With the white scarf I’d given her coiled around her throat, Kotobuki held her schoolbag in both hands and stared ahead worriedly.

Kotobuki… what are you—?!

Had she been waiting here long?

When she saw me, her face cracked and she looked like she was about to cry.

“Oh, thank goodness… I found you.”

Her small voice set the cold air trembling.

Her eyes were filled with tears, and grasping for each word, it took everything Kotobuki had for her to speak.

“Inoue… you left so suddenly yesterday… and you were out again today… so I was worried. I’m sorry for coming… Akutagawa told me… that you were in pain, too, so… so I should wait until you found an answer… but you seemed to be suffering so much… I couldn’t just stand around… I’m sorry… I’m sorry.”

Then Kotobuki’s eyes went round.

“Inoue… why are you crying?”

When she asked me that, I realized I was crying.

My throat felt like it was going to rip open, my heart was full, my nostrils flared, my eyelids were fluttering, and tears were running down my cheeks in a steady stream.

“What’s wrong, Inoue? Did something happen?”

Kotobuki ran up to me, and half in tears herself, she wiped the tears from my cheek with a cold hand.

Her fingers were freezing when they touched my skin. She’d waited for me long enough that her skin had chilled this much.

My forehead wrinkled with suffering. My eyes watered, and she wiped my cheeks again and again. Even so, my throat wouldn’t stop trembling.

Sadness welled up in me.

“… Everyone’s… telling me to write a novel. Tohko and Ryuto both said I had to… and Mr. Sasaki, he used to be my agent, and he asked if I would write again, too… go back to being Miu Inoue…! But I don’t want to write! But still everyone is—”

My voice choked off, sobbing, as I spoke.

Kotobuki started crying with me.

She stood up on tiptoes, circled her arms around my neck, and squeezed me tight. Kotobuki’s tears wet my neck coldly.

“S-so then you don’t need to write. You don’t have to write anymore… I’ll like you even if you don’t write novels… I’ll stay with you.”

The hoarse words she spoke to me, her voice catching with sobs, gave me salvation like light shining through cloud cover.

The way she had given my spirit courage in an abandoned building lit by candles one winter.

Kotobuki had said that I didn’t have to write.

That she would be with me and like me even if I didn’t write.

She’d spoken with conviction the words I’d been wanting to hear this entire time, at rock bottom as I was.

That she liked me when I didn’t write—me, the commoner standing frozen before the narrow gate, the ordinary Konoha Inoue.

With straightforward, clumsy words.

I was ecstatic and reassured by that—Kotobuki had told me that through tears, and I adored her with all of my heart; she had set me free— I hugged Kotobuki back tightly and continued to let my hot tears fall.

Finally we let go of each other shyly.

“Come to school tomorrow, okay?” Kotobuki said, her face crimson.

“I will. Are you sure you don’t want me to walk you home?”

“I’m fine. It’s still early. I-I’ll see you.”

“Oh, Kotobuki.”

I stopped her, then gave a small smile.

“You should come over again sometime. I’ll tell everyone you’re my girlfriend. Plus, I want some more of your lemon meringue pie.”

“O-okay! I’ll make you as many as you want, supersweet and sour.”

An exuberant smile lit Kotobuki’s face like a glow shining from within, and she ran off with a “see you tomorrow!”

I watched Kotobuki go with kind—with tender—feelings until I lost sight of her white scarf gleaming in the darkness.

When I went inside, my mom asked me all sorts of stuff about what happened yesterday. Why hadn’t I given her the phone number? Had I gone to school like I was supposed to?

“I skipped. I’m sorry.”

I hung my head meekly, and it seemed like she was so fed up with me that she’d lost the energy to scold me. She warned me not to do it ever again and that was it.

“We’re having dinner, so come down right away.”

“Okay.”

I’d been crying so much that my throat hurt and my eyelids were puffy, but my heart was clear. It was fine—I would be able to walk forward with Kotobuki now. Even if I was weak on my own, the two of us together could be strong.

As I was changing in my room, my cell phone rang.

I jumped at the solemn ring tone. But I wouldn’t get scared or run away.

“Hello?”

I put it to my ear and answered firmly. I heard a dark voice that seemed to run a hand down my spine.

“So Kotobuki’s gonna be a problem after all, huh?”

My mouth dried out instantly. Had he heard my conversation with Kotobuki?!

“If you don’t break up, I dunno what I’m gonna do. I might mess her up bad and break her.”

I am happy.

Yes, I should be happy. I’m surrounded by kind people, people I love with all my heart, and they love me. I’m so, so happy, simply happy, like I’m in the golden light of sunset—like I’m in a dream.

I’m happy, I am. Like a dream—yes, I am happy. I am happy, Takumi—very.

So then why does my heart hurt this badly? I feel like my soul is being torn to bits! I’m so anxious, as if I’m going to be swallowed up in utter darkness! I write and I write, but I’m sad?

Why? Takumi!

Let’s make a bet, Kana.

If I lose, you’ll never have to see me again for the rest of eternity. If that’s what you want.

The page has already been turned.

Soon “that which is superior” will begin.

Hello, Mizuki Nomura here. This is the graduation of the Book Girl series! This volume and the next, volume two, will conclude the series.

Konoha is getting run ragged all over. But I was afraid to write Ryuto any ***more*** ticked off. Originally I thought he was probably suffering more than any of the main characters, but if I wasn't watching, he would try to go off in the most outrageous directions, so I was always pulling him back desperately, shouting "You can't go that way!!" It looks like Konoha's conflicts are going to continue in volume two.

The inspiration for both volumes is Gide's *Strait Is the Gate.* The delicate emotions expressed by its clear prose make my heart ache. This book makes me feel incredibly restless and every time I reread it, a smokiness builds up in me that makes me feel dismal. As I turn the pages, I think "why?" and even after I close the book I go on thinking, "I wonder why that happened." I can never forget it. It's a work with that sort of seduction to it. You should definitely, definitely get your hands on a copy and read it yourself.

Changing the subject, wasn't Tohko adorable on the cover of the special edition? I was captivated by Konoha and Tohko in kimono (à la Yuri and Akira), and Maki on the other side of them in the color pages. That was a book where I could physically *taste* my joy at having Ms. Takeoka do the drawings.

As I wrote in the afterword of the first story, I'm always filled with anxiety when I start a series. I write each story, praying that people will read to the very end. That I'll be able to reach the conclusion I pictured in my heart with the space I need to do it. I don't care if the series doesn't sell a lot; all I want is for it to keep selling well enough that I can get to my goal. So that I can tell the story right. That's how I feel, so I'm truly thrilled that I'll be able to bring you the last story next time with all the space I wanted! From the bottom of my heart, I thank every one of you who's read this far!

The Book Girl comic serialization is starting with *Gangan Powered* in June, and there are plans for a short story collection and side stories, but the series will conclude next time. I hope you'll come to watch what choices Konoha and Tohko make. See you!

Mizuki Nomura

March 27, 2008

Afterword

Every single time, it's the same thing.
Thank you to my editor.
With your help, somehow I managed.
I'll do my best on the next one, too.

Miho Takeda

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Book Girl and the Scribe Who Faced God, Part 1

Story: MIZUKI NOMURA

Illustration: MIHO TAKEOKA

Translation by Karen McGillicuddy This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Bungakushoujo to kami ni nozomu romancier vol. 1

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First published in Japan in 2008 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION ENTERBRAIN

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION ENTERBRAIN

through Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo.

English translation © 2013 by Hachette Book Group, Inc.

Cover design by Kirk Benshoff Cover © 2013 Hachette Book Group, Inc.

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Yen Press

Hachette Book Group

237 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10017

www.HachetteBookGroup.com

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First ebook edition: July 2013

ISBN 978-0-316-24598-2

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